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EXAMINING TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE UNITED STATES  
SOCIAL CLASS SYSTEM

Tracy Stevenson-Olson  
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of  
Doctor of Education  
in the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

National College of Education  
National Louis University

June, 2016


THE EXAMINATION OF TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS  
OF SOCIAL CLASS IN THE UNITED STATES

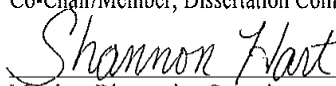
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Tracy Stevenson-Olson  
Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

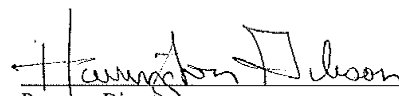
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5-31-16  
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## **ABSTRACT**

As the number of school aged children living in poverty increases, the inherent inequities within the United States class system continue to grow. Teacher perceptions regarding the social class system in the United States are examined utilizing focus group interviews with four teachers in an urban high school. A critical qualitative methodology was used to explore how the participants make sense of the complex social class system and how they perceive the impact of social class within the school context. The findings include two overarching themes that influenced these teachers' perceptions and interpretations of social class: their own personal narrative /identity construction and the mindset of poverty. Personal narrative/identify construction includes the participants' experiences from family life as well as interactions with friends, colleagues, students and their families. The mindset of poverty includes the belief in the "American Dream," the belief that all can achieve in spite of systemic barriers and overwhelming evidence that most people in the US die in the same social class in which they were born. Recommendations are made for further research and for specific professional development for educators to include an emphasis on how teachers perceive their own and their students' social class, and how this impacts teaching and learning.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The four teachers who participated in this research did so unwaveringly. They were forthright in their opinions and insights that occurred throughout this process. As an educator, I understand the dedication and hard work it takes to be a classroom teacher. Teachers deserve the highest respect and gratitude for all they do every day for each of their students. Unless you have experienced it, you cannot understand it. While I have thanked each one privately, this is my public acknowledgement of the work they do every day to make a difference in the life of a child.

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation first, to my parents, William and Margaret Stevenson. Without the love and support they showed me when they were here, I would not be who I am today.

Secondly, I dedicate this to my husband Gary and son, Ian. They stood by me and encouraged me to finish, no matter how long it took. They truly are the reason I strive to be a better a person, every day.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	ii
DEDICATION .....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	iv
CHAPTER ONE .....	1
Introduction to the Study .....	1
Researcher's Perspective .....	3
Purpose of the Research .....	6
Research Questions .....	7
Research Methodology .....	7
Rationale .....	8
CHAPTER TWO .....	11
Review of Literature .....	11
Definitions of Social Class .....	11
Relationships between Poverty and Academic Achievement .....	16
Teacher's Perceptions and Expectations .....	18
School Funding .....	22
CHAPTER THREE .....	24
Research Methodology .....	24
Methodology .....	25
Critical Qualitative Research .....	25
Values and Beliefs of the Researcher .....	27
Context and Participants .....	29
Data Collection Method .....	29
Description, Analysis and Interpretation of the Data .....	31
Summary .....	34
CHAPTER FOUR .....	35
Research Findings .....	35
The Connection Between Social Class and Achievement .....	36
Analysis .....	38



Experience as Evidence for Understanding Social Class.....	38
Analysis .....	42
The Struggles of the Affluent.....	42
Analysis .....	45
Comparing the Caste System to the United States Social Class System .....	46
Analysis .....	49
Social Class in the Classroom .....	49
Analysis .....	51
Student's Understanding of Their Position in the Social Class System.....	51
Analysis .....	53
Social Class and Values .....	53
Analysis .....	58
Standardized Testing .....	59
Analysis. ....	66
Teacher's Responsibilities and Obligations .....	67
Summary .....	71
CHAPTER FIVE .....	74
Analysis and Recommendations .....	74
Personal Narrative/Identity Construction.....	76
American dream .....	80
Entitlement.....	83
Social class identification .....	85
Role of urban education.....	86
Reflection and Learnings .....	87
Recommendations .....	91
Pre-Service Education .....	92
REFERENCES .....	98

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Introduction to the Study**

“Poverty and extremes of inequality have direct effects on urban students and schools”  
(Anyon, 2005, p.79).

The “American Dream” is a myth that continues to permeate the thinking of people in the United States today. While some think of immigrants with regard to this myth, others think of the poor already here in this country. The idea is that, “if those poor people would just work harder, they, too could achieve the American Dream.: While the social class system in the United States is called an open system, it is only open for a fortunate few. Throughout human history, most people live and die in the social class into which they were born. If they were born poor, chances are they will die poor. (Science Netlinks). Often, when a closed social class system is discussed, it is the Caste System in India. Unfortunately, that is the case for most people, especially those born into poverty, in the United States. This reality is misunderstood by many people, including teachers. This misperception can negatively affect students who need to excel the most, academically, in order to break the downward spiral of poverty.

Currently, the gap between the rich and poor is wider than it has ever been. The people living at the poverty level have increased steadily for the last four years, with the majority of those being children. Average household income decreased by 2.3% from 2009 to 2010. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). In 2014, the median income of these households was 4% less than in 2000 (Pew Research Center, 2015). While there was a “War on Poverty” by President Lyndon B. Johnson in the 1960’s, the progress has been lacking. Government spending continues to increase (Silver, 2013). Where that money is allocated depends on which political party is

making the budgetary decisions. But, the fact remains the same. The poverty rate has been increasing over the last few years, and as a result school districts in the United States are seeing an increase in the percentage of children qualifying for free and/or reduced lunch.

People's underlying beliefs and values drive their behaviors and attitudes, which in turn drives how they react and act to others. Teachers are no different. I have heard many teachers explain their reasoning for entering the profession as a way to help children. Yet, which children they want to help is never explicitly explained. The underlying assumption is that they are referring to all children. However, I have come to question if "all" truly means "all.: How can teachers help all children if their belief system is embedded within the ideology that all children have an equal opportunity to achieve the American Dream? The ideology behind the American Dream is riddled with the false assumptions that all people have access to attain a comfortable life where money is not a main concern or worry. The idea of meritocracy is embedded in our thinking in the United States. The assumption behind this belief is that our social class system is structured so anyone and all can succeed. The thinking is that we all have equal access to obtain the American Dream. This is not the case. Some need different and more support if they are going to succeed.

I believe that if teachers do not understand the workings of the social class system, and instead have a belief system that embodies ideas such as, "if they would just pull up their bootstraps they could get out of poverty," these teachers may consciously and unconsciously display these ideals toward children. Children living in poverty need more support to succeed than children in the middle and upper social classes. If teachers aren't able to understand this, and continue to exacerbate the myth that everyone should be treated the same in order to be fair

to all, the social class system will continue as is and the children of poverty will remain in poverty.

“You will most likely die in the social class you are born into.: I read this statement in one of the textbooks we used when I was teaching high school students; it completely changed my way of viewing public education and the social class system in the United States. The understanding that children born into poverty have little hope of escaping, emotionally bankrupted me. The children in the United States that need the “American Dream” the most seem to be defeated before they actually begin. But, there is always hope. Hope in the form of education. Hope in the form of a “free and public education for all.: Hope that the education for those most in need is equal to the education that Bill Gates’ children will receive. Hope that the education system will look at all children through the lens of inequities within the school system. Hope that the educational system will include the creation of a system where students are exposed to the facts and realities that the social class system creates. It is this hope that motivates and drives my educational decisions.

### **Researcher’s Perspective**

I began my teaching career in the fall of 1989. Graduating with a Secondary Broad field Social Studies certification allowed me to teach many social studies courses offered at the high school level. With an additional certification in psychology, I was able to teach one of the coveted electives in social studies. When I began teaching the culture was similar to that of many high schools; most of the teachers felt a sense of privilege when teaching electives. After all, students *choose* to be in that class. I was just excited to read and research with my students in the different areas of the human experience and social and animal behavior. As a teacher I always looked at research assignments as a joint learning experience. I wanted to share my love of learning psychology and how it is relevant to everyday life.

Due to some teaching assignment shifts in the social studies department I was made aware of the fact that I may also get to teach sociology. I only needed 6 credits for certification in that area, so I immediately enrolled and received certification within the year. Now, in my second year of teaching, I was not only teaching my favorite subject (psychology), but I was also teaching my second favorite subject, sociology. In order to assist me, my department chair and mentor gave me all of his files for sociology and another course, Social Problems. I really thought I was fortunate. I had the opportunity to work with high school students, my favorite age group, and read, research, and learn beside them in areas that were of great interest to me. I loved going to work every day. I had no idea how personally and professionally life altering the next few years were going to be for me.

In Social Problems I had units such as Crime, Discrimination and Racism, and Poverty. In Sociology there was the unit on Social Stratification: Social Class Systems. When I had students who were enrolled in both classes, they made the connections I made. They saw the connections between social class, racism, discrimination, racism, and poverty. It wasn't until we were introduced to Jonathan Kozol that education was also one of the connecting dots. Much of what I was teaching in class was not "covered" in a traditional text book. I had to search for supplemental materials and readings that had the information and facts that supported both conservative and liberal viewpoints on the controversial issues we discussed in class. As a classroom teacher, it was my responsibility to show multiple sides of all topics we studied.

Some of the ideas we learned that helped shaped my belief system are:

- The American Social Class system may appear to be open, but only open to a select few;
- Prisons are disproportionately filled with minorities;

- Minorities are disproportionately comprised at the poverty level;
- White males disproportionately hold seats of power including Congress and CEOs;
- Laws can be racially biased; the punishment for crack cocaine is stricter than the punishment for cocaine;
- Urban public schools, filled with children at the poverty level and minorities, receive less funding than suburban public schools;
- Urban public schools are filled with teachers with less experience and qualifications than the counterparts in the suburbs

These were only a few of the ideas that led me to believe that children in urban public settings need advocates more than most. While I looked into teaching positions, I thought I could make more of a difference for more children in administration. This is what has brought me to where I am today.

My classroom was filled with close to 90% of the children coming from middle to upper middle class homes; the vast majority of the students were White. The interesting component was the fact that I taught in a high school district, unusual for Wisconsin, with four feeder K-8 schools. This included five school boards and five different administrators. The communities were vastly different. One K-8 building had the children who lived in million dollar homes on Lake Geneva. Another K-8 building had children of the high school teachers and other middle class families. The third was a mix of the above. The fourth was where 10% of the students whose families' incomes were at or below the poverty level lived. These communities were small and most everyone knew everyone else, and especially, where everyone *lived*.

I didn't live in any of the aforementioned communities. I felt this gave me an advantage. I didn't know the community the children came from and as a result my expectations were the

same for every student: do the work and if you don't understand something come in and see me. I will help you learn what everyone else in the class is expected to learn. When I reflect back on this I remember derogatory comments from teachers referencing the town the students were from. While this was mostly done in a joking manner, it wasn't a joke, and I took offense. Being young in my career I didn't challenge the "old guard." I chose not to surround myself with the teachers who had high expectations for all students. Teachers that I admired and was learning from, had negative attitudes toward students based on their income level and family life. How could this be?

### **Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this study is to get a glimpse into how teachers make sense of social class and how that may impact their thinking about students and families. While the social class system may appear simplistic, it clearly is not, and understanding the complexity of the system will help educators understand the constraints society places upon public education. In addition, I will explore how school systems mirror the social class system. Schools, as with people, can be placed in the category of the have and have-nots. The hope is that this will raise awareness to how unconsciously this reflection occurs through the eyes of the educators in the system.

The question of how teachers come to their understandings about the social class system will also be examined in an effort to raise awareness in one's own context to continue the idea of how much of our assumptions are held unconsciously. Personal experiences will be visited and analyzed to examine possible implications they have on our perceptions and beliefs about the social class system. Awareness of our social class position will be examined based on personal experiences to possibly determine how and when this occurs. Lastly, beliefs and values through conversation will be analyzed to determine the influence this has on how we make sense of the social class system. The hope is that this study will raise awareness of how influential one's

personal experiences can be as an influence on one's thinking around complex systems such as the social class system.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that guide this inquiry are:

How do teachers make sense of the social class system in the United States?

How do they interpret the social class system in the classroom and in the school system?

How do teachers perceive their students and families in poverty?

What do they see as their responsibilities related to teaching students who live in poverty?

### **Research Methodology**

The methodology I used is critical research. I view social class from the perspective that the system itself is set up for those in power---those in the upper classes—to maintain their position in society through the fact that there will always be people at the poverty level. While this may be unconsciously done by some, and my presumption is that is the case of most educators, others do it consciously.

I used a focus group methodology for gathering rich data. I posed questions for discussion, along with videos to watch and then discuss, with the hope that the questions would not only be answered, but also spark discussion between the participants. The videos were chosen for the same reason, to allow the participants to think about what they were seeing and then respond to one another's thinking. The sessions were approximately two hours in length.

Four teachers with experience teaching in an urban school setting were asked to participate. They all knew each other and were on the same teaching staff. This was important because I hoped they would be more open as they had working relationships that have been built over time. I had hoped for the teachers to have a mixture of urban and suburban teaching experience, however, I was not able to locate participants who met all those criteria. To me, the



most important criteria was for them to have urban experience and a good rapport with each other since the goal for the participants was to have an open and honest conversation around students and the social class system.

## **Rationale**

The rationale for studying this topic is included in why this topic is so important to me. While many authors have discussed the inequities in public education, Jonathan Kozol and Dr. Martin Haberman, for example, the issue of social class and the perceptions of teachers are less well-researched. Students in urban areas, where poverty is more prevalent, need and deserve the best education--more than most students throughout the United States. In line with the thinking of Dr. Haberman, I believe it is a matter of life or death for these students; it is the difference of them having the tools to achieve success, or continuing to perpetuate the downward spiral of poverty. This research can assist teachers and districts in understanding another factor that needs to be addressed when working toward developing culturally proficient adults throughout a school system.

Previously I discussed how I discovered an understanding of how the American Social Class system is biased against those in the lower classes. After conducting research with my students in the 1990s, I started to see how people in the United States would most likely die in the social class they are born into. This is extremely disturbing to me when I think of how children who are born with the same potential seem stifled in a system that has already dictated their fate. Then after reading about the physical teaching conditions in urban districts, I have found a place where I know I can make a difference, one that truly contributes to the betterment of students in need. I started my teaching career with mostly white children in my classroom. Many of them lived in the upper middle class and seemed to bring a sense of entitlement to the classroom. I also worked with white students at the poverty level, those who didn't share that

same sense of entitlement. Interestingly, though, all people at the poverty level are assumed to have a sense of entitlement by many people. These experiences have led me to this research and my current employment; an urban setting working for the improvement of children whom I believe need the absolute best education this country has to offer them.

While studying the social class system in general, race is often a major contributing factor. Race was deliberately left out this research for a few reasons. First, race and racism is more often addressed in schools than the issue of social class, and, while we are far from resolving the problems of racism, we have begun to at least acknowledge many of the issues. Yet the country today continues to be more segregated than in the 1970s. However, including race in this research would have brought even more complexity to an already complex issue. Second, the issue of social class is less often addressed in teacher training and development, and often is not a part of our discussions on how to improve educational practice. Thus, it is my belief that educators should deepen the equity discussion around poverty and social class system and examine our histories, values, and beliefs.

The American Dream is a myth that continues to be perpetuated in our public school system. The social class system in the United States is a rigid system that allows little to no movement which means our most underserved population continues to be underserved. School systems are a microcosm of the city and country they reside in with regard to the social class system. Educational literature is abundant with information on reaching and teaching children in poverty. What hasn't been written about much is how teachers make sense of the social class system and how this influences children in poverty in the classroom. The next chapter will be a review of some of the research related to the social class system in the United States, what is the

current status of the social class system, the influence of poverty and standardized testing, and the social construction of identity in teachers.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Review of Literature**

The purpose of this study was to better understand how teachers perceive their students and their families through the lens of social class. The intent was also to determine how teachers themselves interpret the social class system in the United States and how that interpretation influences their perceptions of their students and families. The research that follows focuses on defining the social class system in the United States, how social class influences its members' thinking, and the effects of social class on education. According to Lareau and Contley, "Most people say they belong either to the middle class or the working class" (Laureau & Contley, 2008, p.28). However, defining social class is no easy task.

#### **Definitions of Social Class**

Many people talk about social class as having only three levels; upper, middle, and lower. Ruby Payne (2013) defines social class in three levels: the poor, middle class, and the wealthy. Three levels do not adequately explain the complexity of the social class system in the United States. However, Payne's work is cited as this is how most people make sense of the social class system. There is much critique with Payne's work. Paul Gorski critiques her work, describing three themes: (1) a failure to consider systemic class inequities in schools; (2) a reliance on the cultural deficit perspective; and (3) fundamentally conservative (Gorski, 2006). While I use Payne's work to help define social class, there is no recommendation that her work be used to address the inequities in the school system. Her terminology is reflective of the terminology used by most middle class teachers and, thus, helpful in framing the conversation.

Sociologists define social class using many layers. Dennis Gilbert (2003) defines social class in five levels: the underclass, the working poor, the middle class, the upper middle class,

and the capitalist class. Gilbert uses two of the main theorists of social stratification to further refine his definition of social stratification. He describes Karl Marx's perspective as, "...the study of social class as the key to understanding the turbulent events in time" (Gilbert, 2003, p.3). This perspective was an underlying theme throughout this research study. The social class system, along with the economic system of capitalism, has created a system in the United States that contains winners and losers. While the winners continue to win, the vast majority of the population continues to fall further behind. As the gap between the rich and poor continues to increase, people become more aware of the social class system and the class they are associated with (Andersen and Curtis, 2012; Curtis, 2013).

Gilbert (2003) uses how people earn their income as a differentiating factor for which social class one belongs to. His definition encompasses the characteristics of wealth, income, occupation, and prestige. The capitalist class receives the bulk of their income from the investments owned and not the amount of income they earn. People in this class consists of approximately 1% of the population. Any incomes earned by people in this group are from occupations such as CEO's or other top executives of businesses. This income usually amounts to 2 million dollars or more per year. The prestige associated with people in the capitalists' class is the highest, due to the occupations and social circles the people associate with.

The upper-middle class consists of professionals and medium sized business owners. The income for people in this class is approximately \$150,000 per year and consists of 14% of the population. The upper class generally makes over \$150,000 on up to \$2,000,000. There is also a sub category here; the working rich. These people earn \$150,000 or more a year, but if they were to stop working, they would lose their income and would no longer be considered a member of this social class.

The next groups defined by Gilbert are the middle and working class. People in both these categories make up 60% of the population. This class consists of what many people refer to as white and blue collar. Blue collar is commonly referred to as manual laborers and white collar as managers, office personnel, or teachers. However, this distinction is not made in definitions by Gilbert (2003). It is the level of skill, knowledge needed, independence or authority in a position that are the defining characteristics; people who belong to this class generally earn approximately \$70,000 per year. Next, the working poor are generally people that have occupations that require little to no skill sets, low wages, and offer no health or other fringe benefits. Many times people in these types of occupations suffer the likelihood of their jobs being temporary and unstable. This group, along with the last group the underclass, suffers from continual financial instability. Lastly, the people in the underclass are those Americans that depend on government assistance programs to earn any income. While they may experience some employment, their primary mode of financial survival is based upon programs such as Social Security and public assistance.

One of the main ideas behind the American Dream, which relates to the social class system, is the idea of meritocracy. The main belief is that if we work hard enough we will be able to break through to the upper classes. While working hard and having talent is valued, it is the social capital that one has that also contributes to the successes one has in life; it is who you know that will assist in upward mobility. Samuel Goldman references the fact that the people in the upper class tend to only socialize with those similar to them (Goldman, 2012). This holds true for the other classes as well. We tend to socialize, mostly, with those who have similar values and beliefs as we do and most likely share the same social class ranking.

Throughout my study the social class system will be referenced in terms that the general public refers to: the upper class, middle class and lower class or the poverty level. The research explained above is an attempt to describe why the social class system is so complex, but then simplified by those who do not have a deep understanding of the complexity.

Dr. Annette Lareau conducted a study to address this very issue. Her study was published in her book, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life* (2011). She examined how parents in twelve different families raise children and how their experiences vary, according to their social class. Lareau explains two types of parenting: Accomplishment of Natural Growth Parenting and Concerted Cultivation. Natural Growth Parenting is attributed to the working class and poor families. She describes this as parents allowing their children to spend much of their growing up in non-structured time. Children are given the flexibility to create and play games they choose; they spend much of their time with extended family and neighbors. Parents are described as giving orders rather than soliciting opinions. Whereas in Concerted Cultivation, much of children's time is structured play time like soccer clubs and band recitals. Parents spend time talking with their children to ask them what they think about topics. Through this seeking of opinions, Lareau summarizes that middle class children learn to question authority and have the confidence to speak up with adults.

David Brooks is a conservative columnist with the New York Times. In a clip on YouTube: Child-rearing, Childhood Development (Siebel Scholars, 2013), he emphasizes there are social and psychological effects found between the working class and middle to upper social class. He mentions the two different parenting styles identified in Lareau's work as two different child rearing styles by the working and middle to upper classes. Brooks describes the working class style as having more freedom as the adult's view life as hard and that children should enjoy

their childhood (Siebel Scholars, 2013). Middle to upper class families, by contrast, drive their children around, have calendars with car pool schedules and when they are born parents are showing Mandarin language flash cards. Brooks finishes by coming back to the idea that it, “is an economic issue but it has profound psychological effects” (Seibel Scholars, 2013).

He also explains that there was an emergence of differences between the social classes that began to show around the 1960s. College educated parented families began to demonstrate lower rates of obesity, smoking, and divorce rates than non-educated parent families. And Brooks stated, “the way people raise their kids is much different.: Highly educated parents increased their spending on their children by \$6,000. This was for tutors, travel, teams, and ACT prep. The working class parents only increase their spending by \$500.00. This is not only “divergent” economically but also psychologically (Siebel Scholars, 2013).

Brooks also cited the author Paul Tough’s book, *How Children Succeed* (2012). Tough discussed that early stress in the lives of children has great implications; it is more difficult for children to self-regulate, control impulses and plan ahead. Examples stresses included divorce, abuse and the loss of a job by a parent (Tough, 2012). In addition, Tough discussed Attachment Theory. Attachment theory relates to the idea that in order for children to be secure and able to take risks, they need to form a healthy attachment with a care giver. If a child has a healthy attachment with their mother by the time they are 18 months old they will then be able to relate to their teachers and peers at schools (Tough, 2012). Brooks quotes the research that 55% of children are securely attached, 20% of children are “avoidably attached,” and the rest are “disorganized attached” (Siebel Scholars, 2013). The children who are securely attached have been predicted to graduate high school with 77% accuracy. If children who grow up in poverty are more likely to experience stress as described above, and that child rearing practices of



families at the poverty level rely upon teaching children not to question the status quo, children of poverty are not equipped to succeed in the traditional school setting (Siebel Scholars, 2013).

### **Relationships between Poverty and Academic Achievement**

When I first began my doctoral studies, I identified my urgency around poverty and the impact that has for children and the educational system. Many of the other urgencies I have, such as courageous leadership, effective teaching and results, are still at the forefront of my thinking. While the education system cannot put an end to poverty, there are examples, such as the 90/90/90 studies by Doug Reeves (2003) that reveal that an educational system can provide an equal opportunity for children. The 90/90/90 studies reported that schools that had 90% poverty, 90% minority children, scored at 90% proficient/advanced proficient on state testing. This study, conducted from 1995 to 1998 consisted of over 130,000 students, 220 schools, ranging from elementary to high schools, and included schools from inner-city urban, suburban, and rural areas. Student data, as well as classroom observations were analyzed to draw conclusions. Common characteristics were found between the schools. 1. A focus on academic achievement which included the narrowing of priorities. 2. Clear curriculum choices, spending more time on reading, mathematics and writing. 3. Frequent assessment of student progress with multiple opportunities for improvement. 4. A focus on non-fiction writing, and 5. Collaboration for scoring student work, including principals. Reeves contends that poverty and achievement are not correlated from the research he conducted. While this did not take the children out of poverty, they were in a better place to go on to college, which could get them out of poverty.

“National tragedies are not always sudden.: This statement by James Lardner in *Inequality Matters: The Growing Economic Divide in America and Its Poisonous Consequences* (Lardner & Smith, 2005), begins a paragraph and foreshadows one of the main ideas behind my research. The gap between the poor and rich continues to widen. While this is detrimental to

American as a whole society, it also impacts and places challenges on public education. Educators are being held accountable for student achievement since the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) 2001. The underlying belief behind ESEA is that *no child will be left behind*. I believe all educators would agree this worthy and that all children deserve to achieve and prosper. The Reauthorization of ESEA was released in November, 2015. Now dubbed, *The Every Student Succeeds Act*. The testing remains similar; reading and math in grades 3 through 8 and one time in high school. Districts still have to report out on subgroups like English Language Learners, low socioeconomic status, special education and minorities. States will have more flexibility in holding districts accountable but will have to include other factors, to address factors that influence student learning such as, access to advanced course work, school climate, and teacher engagement. Most agree these are factors that should be taken into consideration to make sure all children succeed.

However, the disagreement comes into play when you have children with varying backgrounds, disabilities, and abilities. Herein lies the problem. While we all agree that all children should be able to achieve, but we need to ask ourselves, “are all students beginning at the same place? Are all students coming to school ready to learn at the same levels?” Diane Ravitch is a Professor of Education at New York State University. She is an outspoken advocate for public education. In a clip from You Tube, she states, “It is the persistence of poverty. I know we are not supposed to say that, but it is true” (Ravitch, 2011). She names a study by ETS (Educational Testing System); *The Black and White Achievement Gap: When Progress Stopped* (Barton & Coley, 2010).

ETS is a non-profit organization that works with educational organizations to provide assessments and conduct research. She began saying that standardized assessments, such as,

ACT or SAT, or the National Assessment given by the Federal Government (NAEP) demonstrate a correlation between poverty and test scores. The richest kids score at the top and the poorest kids score at the bottom. She also discusses how it is reported out that the United States does so poorly on International Assessments. She continues that in schools with low amounts of poverty, the US out performed Finland, Japan, and Korea. In US schools with 25% poverty, the US scored equivalent to Finland, Japan and Korea. “As the proportion of poor kids grows, the test scores go down.” (Ravitch, 2011). This seems to contradict the ideals behind Reeve’s work and his 90/90/90 study. The contradiction is an important component as there are two viewpoints. While the underlying idea that all children can learn is important to drive the work of educators with all children, understanding the monumental challenges that children in poverty face is extremely important to ensuring high academic success.

### **Teacher’s Perceptions and Expectations**

“America has chosen to be more unequal; and as that fact becomes increasingly clear, it could be the key to a tectonic shift in perception.” (Lardner & Smith, 2005, p. 24). How do the perceptions of teachers with regard to social class impact education? Do educators feel they have little to no impact on changing the lives of children of poverty? Are the challenges that some students of poverty bring to school too difficult to try to combat? According to Bill Moyers, “...more children are growing up in poverty in America than in any other industrial nation.” (Moyers, cited in Lardner & Smith, 2005.) Inequality appears to be missing from the conversation around the children in our educational system. The staggering idea that children of poverty continue to perform at lower levels than other children should be every teacher’s urgency. There is a saying that “*perception is reality*.: But, what are teacher’s perceptions about their students? How does that perception influence their thinking and actions in the school setting? According to Page, “Perceptions are not simply the idiosyncratic notions of individuals,

but are shared by faculty members in a school. Furthermore, teachers perceive students' social characteristics, albeit not necessarily accurately” (Page, 1987. p. 77). There is a misconception that parents at the poverty level don’t care about education. (Gorski, 2013.) Generally, educators make the assumption that parents that attend school events have a higher value for education than those parents who do not attend. Gorski, referencing research conducted by Patterson, Hale and Stessman (2008) states, “In fact, research has shown that teachers assume that low-income families are completely uninvolved in their children’s schooling (Gorski, 2003, p. 60).: Gorski continues that what is not taken into consideration are factors that prevent parents from attending school events. An example is with regard to low paying jobs and the ability to take time off from work. Many times parents in this situation have little to no paid leave, no childcare, and lack transportation. (Gorski, 2013.p.61).

Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintas conclude that expectations for students vary from teachers and administrators based on social class. The educational system is reflective of society and therefore socioeconomic status negatively impacts students. In an educational system funded by public dollars with an unequal distribution of funds, the bulk of the finances is awarded to those in power; the capitalist class (Cole, 1988). Race, social class, and previous achievement are ascertained to be the most influential characteristics when it comes to teachers and their expectations for students (Proctor, 1984). Iakovos Tsiplakides & Areti Keramida confirm the findings that previous achievement and social class, if students impact teachers’ perceptions (2010). This may be conscious or unconscious, but these characteristics influence the perceptions teachers have of students. Unfortunately for the students who happen to be of color, in the lower social classes, and have previous low achievement, they are faced with low expectations.

The effects of low expectations by teachers are negative for students in many ways. Students may not receive work that is considered “on grade level.” This work may be thought of as too challenging and as a result, the curriculum is “watered down” to meet the perceived needs of the students (Proctor, 1984; Tsiplakides & Keramida 2010). If students are not exposed to grade level expectations with the confidence that all can achieve at this level, there is little hope that students will achieve grade level outcomes. Stephen Peters said, “no one can rise to low expectations” (Peters, 2006, p. 4). If the work students are being asked to do in the classroom are not respectful and age appropriate, students will not perform and will possibly act out. A disruption in class then further compounds the teacher’s negative perceptions.

Another way students are affected by low expectations is in the type of questions teachers ask (Proctor, 1984). Questioning techniques is one of the more difficult tasks for teachers to master. Socratic questioning professional development is usually plentiful and opportunities for teachers to attend are easy to find; it is in the application of the professional development that is difficult. Scaffolding questions takes careful planning and I have had teachers tell me that many students cannot answer open-ended types of questions. These types of questions are thought best suited for the students in the honors or Advanced Placement classes. As a result, if teacher do not hold high expectations for all students, only a few are exposed to thought provoking questions. Low expectations also result in students receiving less praise for answers, are given less time to respond, and receive more criticism for incorrect answers (Proctor, 1984). Students who are thought to be high achievers are quoted by a teacher as, “You don’t have to *work* to relate to them.....Usually I give them an assignment and they take it from there: I do hardly anything and they’re off and running” (Page, 1987).

The types of questions a teacher can ask may also depend on the experiences the student brings with them to the classroom. When children are able to answer questions easily through experiences they have had outside of the classroom, the teacher tends to believe the students can then handle questioning that is more cognitively demanding and requires more than a rote answer. If the student does not have the background information to draw upon, research has demonstrated that the teacher tends to stay at the lower level of questioning. Students who live in poverty tend to come to school with fewer of the school sanctioned experiences and background knowledge to lend to conversations. Teachers then equate different kinds of background experiences with lower academic expectations. Students are still capable of answering higher level questions, it just takes a skilled teacher to draw upon what they do know to make the connections (Harris & Williams 2012).

In addition, another study found that socioeconomic status of students impacted teacher's perceptions regarding their literacy ability. The lower the socioeconomic status, the lower the perception of achievement (Ready & Wright, 2011).

The type of communication/reinforcement that that low-expectation students receive is not the same as the students with high-expectations (Proctor, 1984). There is a lack of genuine care and concern communicated to low-expectation students through negative tones, less eye contact, and less smiling. In some instances, students are placed in the back the room and they are not given the opportunity to take leadership roles in the classroom. Formative feedback is essential to the learning process (Black & William, 1998). Feedback needs to be specific and given in a timely fashion. All of the above-mentioned behaviors can be interpreted by the student as the teacher not genuinely caring about them. If students don't feel a connection from the teacher their chances of learning and being successful in the classroom lessen. One such

academic strategy is the use of formative assessment and feedback. Feedback within the formative assessment system is said to be a contributing factor to the increase in mathematics test scores for Finland in the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment).

### **School Funding**

Educational Researcher and Theorist, Linda Darling-Hammond stated, “The shameful irony of American education is that the very children that need the most resources receive the fewest and pay the biggest price” (as cited in Fine & Burns, 2003). Jonathan Kozol was the first author I read who documented the dilapidated conditions in existence in inner city schools. He documents the basic lack of textbooks and supplies, but it is the compelling stories about the neighborhoods the children are from that made a lasting impression on me. Children walking home from school are used the smells of the burning carnage from the local hospital; broken windows are a common scene; and many experience the loss of friends and family at a very young age (Kozol, 1991.) It is evident that the children live in neighborhoods where finances are of grave concern for all who live there. Kozol questions how a city and nation can allow its citizens and children to live in such conditions. The answer lies within the social class system in the United States.

Bill Moyers produced a video in 1991 titled *Unequal Education* (Moyers, 1991). In this production, two schools in New York were profiled; Riverdale Junior High School and South Fordham Junior High School. The principals from each school describe the schools: Riverdale was similar to a private school in the suburbs and South Fordham was like the typical inner city school. Other discrepancies between the two schools were: Fordham had no outside track and all sports were played in a crowded gym; Riverdale had a grassy outdoor track for all sports. Riverdale had a variety of musical instruments for students whereas Fordham had an electronic keyboard. Riverdale had students using microscopes, where children at Fordham were doing

experiments with no other materials than their bodies. The principal of Fordham states that there are many teachers on his staff who are not certified, whereas at Riverdale the principal states almost all his teachers are certified. Boys interviewed from both schools aspire to have professional careers; one a lawyer and one a veterinarian. The teaching in both schools was also different. The uncertified teacher at South Fordham is seen raising his voice at the students to quiet down and stop acting like animals. The teacher at Riverdale is seen explaining the directions for the science lab in a quiet voice to students. The comparison between the two schools leaves the viewer seeing the difference in expectations for students.

In conclusion, defining the social class system in the United States is no simple feat; it is a complex system with many layers. Most people do however, simplify it into three levels, upper, middle and lower. The social class you live in influences family life as well. Middle and upper class children are often raised in very structured environments with daily schedules that are filled activities. Working class and lower class children often grow up in a more natural environment allowing for unstructured play and discovery. There is a correlation with the poverty level and low achievement. Teacher's perceptions of social class influence their expectations and interactions with their students. As a result, students who come from lower socioeconomic status often experience teaching to be at a lower level.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Research Methodology

“I interview because I am interested in other people’s stories. Most simply put, stories are a way of knowing” (Seidman, 2006).

Generally speaking, teachers are passionate about children. Teachers often tell me they went into education because they love children, wanted to make a difference in the life a child or to pass on the passion for being a life-long learner. And yet today, many question why there are still those who want to go into education. With the passage of the No Child Left Behind legislation, the buzz word in education is accountability. *Teachers need to be held accountable so that all children learn.* Accountability is an essential component of making any system work. However, with the complexity of human behavior and the learning process, the variables to *hold teachers accountable* are overwhelming, complicated, and not easy to measure. While some teachers feel No Child Left Behind was *done to* them, others embrace and accept the idea that all means all, regardless of the life’s circumstances, such as social class.

The political spectrum on social class is divided. There are those who feel that all people can escape poverty and achieve a better life; yet others believe the social class system is more similar to the Caste system we all learned about in World History. One’s perspective may determine how others are treated. It is essential to know and understand the perspectives of teachers in public education. This study is an attempt to find out how four teachers make sense of the complex social class system in the United States and, in turn, how that influences how they make sense of their students and families.

## **Methodology**

Qualitative research began in the work of the social sciences, more specifically in the fields of sociology and anthropology, in the early 1900s. Qualitative research is not one method; it is a compilation and combination of many. While critics of qualitative research define it as soft, (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), it also is an in-depth method of discovering the why's behind people's behavior. While scientific study at first relied upon strictly observable behavior, the observer cannot quantify the reasons behind actions; only that the actions themselves occur. Qualitative researchers seek to answer the questions of how meaning is given to societal, group, or individual events (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

“The key to understanding qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world” (Merriam, 2002, p. 3). Merriam describes several characteristics that define qualitative research. The first has been mentioned as the overall purpose of this study: to understand how people make sense of situations in their lives. The second refers to the idea behind the collection of evidence and data. The researcher is the main collector and analyzer of the data. Qualitative study is also inductive. This situates the researcher to take the data collected to build theories and concepts that may not exist. The final characteristic of qualitative research is that the study is *richly descriptive* (Merriam, 2002, p.5). Data will include direct quotations from the participants as well an analysis of the responses.

## **Critical Qualitative Research**

This study focuses on a critical qualitative approach. “Qualitative researchers influenced by critical theory are interested in either how social values and organizations get reproduced in schools and other educational institutions, or how people produce their choices and actions in society (Weiler, 1988).” The social and political aspects of social class will be examined through a collaborative inquiry focus group to discover how teachers interpret the social class system in

the United States and make sense of that system with regards to their students and daily working lives. As mentioned in chapter two, the United States is in a time period where the gap between the rich and poor is the largest it has been in the last 30 years. “For Marxism, getting and keeping economic power is the motive behind all social and political activities, including education, philosophy, religion, government, the arts, science, technology, the media, and so on” (Tyson, 2006, pp.53-54). Simplified, Marx defines the haves and have-nots as those who own the businesses and those who work for the owners. The social class system in the United States is much more complicated than the aforementioned definition and many define it as a stratified system. The underlying assumption is that the American social class system is set up to be unequal. There are winners and there are losers. This concept transcends into public education through institutional processes, but also through subtle unconscious beliefs. This study will attempt to make those processes and beliefs visible and conscious.

The purpose of this study is to build upon the one of the principles of Marx’s social theory. “...the mass of workers’ separation from the means of production produces direct conflict with those that possess capital” (Held, 1980, p.41). Using the critical qualitative lens is appropriate for this type of study for many reasons. Critical theory articulates the power struggle that occurs between people and the norms in society. Whether it is the view regarding social class as a closed system, or the view of feminist criticism and the objectification of women, or the African American criticism of the idea of White privilege, it is a struggle against those in power in the hope of justice. This relationship to a particular group of people is damaging and needs action in order to change and rectify the injustice.

These inequitable relationships exist and are reflective of American society. This needs to be recognized, and all groups, especially those in power positions, need to implement change and

to listen to those not in power positions. It is through this lens this study is being conducted. As the American social class system is complex, so is the American education system. The education system is a reflection of what happens in society. While many are aware of the power struggles that occur within the school systems and throughout society, it is the continued effort to educate for awareness. The critical qualitative approach is necessary to understand the thinking and meaning making of educators and how those meanings relate to the overall struggle for justice that takes place in the social class system in the United States.

### **Values and Beliefs of the Researcher**

The topic being studied lends itself to much conversation among teachers. Parents and family backgrounds are brought many times into the conversation teachers have when discussing the No Child Left Behind legislation, and its subsequent renewal known as Every Student Succeeds Act. On December 10, 2015, President Barack Obama signed the new version of NCLB, commonly known as Every Student Succeeds Act, (ESSA) (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). One difference is that the testing and accountability is now set at the state level. However, the intent of NCLB is still the same.

Since the NCLB legislation has mandated that subgroups of student achievement must be reported out, the status of all groups is brought to the public's attention. In Wisconsin the groups include those labeled with a disability, socioeconomic status, gender, race/ethnicity, English proficiency, and migrant status. As the broad topic itself is discussed among educators, it was imperative that I remained open minded and ensured that my participants felt safe to speak their minds.

My research question centers on how teachers make sense of poverty. How they perceive their students and families in poverty and how they interpret the social class system and apply that to their students and families. How does the social class system influence teacher

perception? How do they interpret the social class system in the classroom and in the school system? While this study will not provide a simple cause and effect scenario, it will give educators an insight into the thinking of a group of teachers from an urban school setting. The focus is on how they make sense of the social class system and education. While some literature suggests that, “The qualitative researcher’s challenge is to demonstrate that personal interest will not bias the study” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p.28), others have recognized that it is best to acknowledge the influence of the researcher on the analysis and interpretation of the data overtly (Walcott, 1994).

Qualitative research is best suited for this study based on the following: First, the data collection method utilized is a focus group for discussion around questions and video excerpts. The questions asked are open ended and are better suited to a group discussion. From there, I attempt to “make sense” of how the teachers answered the open ended questions and their responses to one another by creating categories of the themes that arise in the responses. In addition, the process included the participants’ opportunities to ask questions about the intent behind each question being asked. In quantitative studies, generally, the questions are structured and do not allow for any variance from the script.

Using the lens of critical theory is one of the best methods for inquiries regarding the social class system. My perspective on the social class system is based in fundamental underpinning of Karl Marx. As he is one of the most prevalent theorists of critical theory, this only makes sense. The critical theorist looks through the lens of inherently unequal. As the current data suggests the gap between the rich and the poor is at its highest in 30 years, it appears that the current social class system is not working to benefit all in the United States. Innocent bystanders of the fall out are the students in public education. Over the last ten years in the states

of Illinois and Wisconsin, the number of children receiving free and/or reduced lunch has steadily grown. For the most part, the children in districts with high levels of students labeled as economically disadvantaged have not achieved as their counter students. Herein lies my urgency. It is my hope that this study will produce an understanding of how four teachers make sense of the social class system. I also hope this will spur the need for studies of this magnitude on a larger scale.

### **Context and Participants**

The district chosen to gather participants from is in the Midwest, with over 70% of the students receiving free and/or reduced lunch. For over 10 years the district has been experiencing continuous growth in its free and/or reduced lunch population. This district has over 70,000 students and the demographics of the student body are diverse. More than 60% of the students are non-white and this number has grown approximately 20% over the last ten years. As previously stated, four teachers have agreed to participate in this study. Two female and two male teachers, all four teach in high school, grades 9 through 12, and all have at least five years of teaching experience. Their identities will remain anonymous.

### **Data Collection Method**

The group interview/focus group method was used to collect narratives related to how the four teachers make sense of the social class system in the United States and how that relates to how they view and engage with the students in their classrooms and the families of their students. "...interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways to try to understand our fellow human beings" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, pp.654). These qualitative interviews were unstructured. In a structured interview protocol, the interview has stringent rules to be followed. As one of the main hopes of the research is determine how teachers make sense of students, families and social class, it is through the unstructured format that this will occur more openly.

The unstructured group interview/focus group method was chosen to allow participants to listen and respond to one another's comments, as well as questions posed and videos watched. The hope is that the conversation will include reactions and thinking based on participant responses. In a structured interview the interviewer is to remain completely formal and neutral, not interpret questions for the interviewee and not state an opinion about the interviewee's answers. An unstructured interview, ".....attempts to understand the complex behavior of members of society without imposing any prior categorization that may limit the field of inquiry" ((Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.653). As the purpose of this study is to find out how teachers make sense of social class in relation to their students, it is important that the questions be open ended and the format remain unstructured. The selection of the process for the group interview/focus group was important as it influenced the outcome of the study. The questions were constructed to elicit responses that would allow the participants to begin and ease into the conversation. The first question was, "The research has been relatively clear about the connection between social class and achievement. What hasn't been clearly identified is how and why the connection exists. How would you explain the correlation between social class and achievement?"

Videos were also chosen to elicit reactions. The selection of videos was carefully done in order to represent different viewpoints and not reflect the belief system of the researcher. One video excerpt was from a program created by The Center for New American Media (2001) and PBS, *People Like Us*. This program highlights some of the differences between people in the varying social classes in the United States. The segment that I chose shows a plumber, identified as working class, who discusses how people in the different social classes don't intermingle, even at church. He (the plumber) explains how he sees the United States social class system more similar to the Caste System in India. This excerpt was chosen to see what and if the

participants had thought about the idea of the rigidity of the social class system, and to see how deeply they have thought about the social class system itself.

The second video clip that was shown was that of Educational Historian Diane Ravitch speaking about standardized testing and the correlation between achievement and poverty. In this video Dr. Ravitch says that poverty is the reason for low test scores, and she also states that she is not supposed to say that. This video excerpt was chosen so participants could feel free to say what they are thinking, as Dr. Ravitch did. The information she shares about testing also provided additional information about testing and how the United States fares compared to other countries, which was a topic for discussion.

The last video segment chosen was to garner reactions to what the teachers thought students were thinking about the effects of social class. I showed the Bill Moyers film, *Unequal Education*, described in chapter two, about two public schools in New York, with very different levels of resources. The excerpt chosen was of the boy from the school with fewer resources who lived in an inner city area. The boy and his sister discuss how they do not like their neighborhood and hope to get out. This excerpt was chosen in an effort to allow the participants to hear from students what their thinking is in an inner city school.

### **Description, Analysis and Interpretation of the Data**

Wolcott describes three questions to set the stage for description, analysis, and interpretation. The description is an attempt to answer, “what is going on here?” (Wolcott, 1994, p.12). This involves the researcher interpreting the observations made. A second question, “how things work?” (Wolcott, 1994, p.13) also must take into consideration if things are not working and a possible explanation of how they could work better. The third question, “what is to be made of it all?” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 12) refers to the interpretation. Wolcott goes on to state, “By no means do I suggest that the three categories-description, analysis, and interpretation- are



mutually exclusive. Nor are the lines clearly drawn where description end and analysis begins, or where analysis becomes interpretation (Wolcott, 1994, p.11).

Analysis is defined as a formal process in which the researcher may connect the data to formal research. Wolcott describes ten ways to approach analysis (Walcott, 1994). They include: highlighting the findings; displaying the findings; report out systemic fieldwork procedures; identify patterns; contextualize the findings in a broader analytical framework; critique the research process; and propose a redesign of the study. I used the approach of contextualizing the findings to a broader analytical framework. Connections within the data were made to themes identified as, connection between social class and achievement; how the participants knew their truths to be truths; problems of the lower, middle, and upper classes; comparisons of United States social class system to the Caste social class system; students' knowledge of their position in the social class system; values and social class; inequities in the present structure of the school system; standardized testing; and educator's obligations.

The group interviews were recorded with the participants' consent. The interviews were then transcribed and listened to multiple times by the researcher. While patterns and similarities in responses will be noted, the differences between the responses will also be analyzed. The purpose of this study is to find out how teacher make sense of the social class system in relation to their students and families. This information will be presented in a narrative based on the categories or themes that appeared as a result of the questions and videos used to elicit responses in chapter four. I will then take each response and look for information pertinent that answers the bigger question of how he/she is making sense of the social class system. I will need to make judgments with regard to data that is relevant and irrelevant to each question.

One of the methods Wolcott describes in organizing and presenting the data is *progressive focusing*. His statement, “.... through a progressive focusing that goes in either direction, slowly zooming from broad context to the particulars of the case, or starting with a close-in view and gradually backing away to include more context.” (Walcott, 1994, p.18), provides guidance for how I structured the flow of the conversations or group interviews.

One way in which Wolcott describes how to interpret the data is to, “*Connect with personal experience*.” Because the basis for this study is so personal, I used interpretation based on my experiences, research, and beliefs. I am confident in being able to make connections between participant responses and research. It is important for me to acknowledge this, even though this may be obvious in qualitative research itself. It will be through the writing process that analysis and interpretation will also come to fruition.

“Writing is also a way of “knowing”—a method of discovery and analysis. (Denzin & Richardson, 2000). In the early 1990’s when I was a teacher, one initiative I experienced was reading and writing in the content areas. A phrase that resonated with me was, “*writing is like thinking on paper*.” This helped me understand how the writing process was more than a step by step process I was led to believe in high school. Writing took on a different meaning when I was able to translate that concept into my professional work for my students and myself. While researching qualitative research, sociology professor Laurel Richardson explains the idea that when anyone *retells* something there is some piece of that person in the writing itself. (Richardson, 2000). When someone is trying to *make meaning* of a piece of literature or writing, the construction itself is discovery. I have found this particularly true in my doctoral program. The writing has been a process of me understanding, by reading other professional work, how I have come to believe what I believe and why.

## **Summary**

The purpose of this study is to get an understanding of how four teachers in an urban school district make sense of the social class system in the United States. My hope is that through the method of group interviews, the process of how the teachers make sense of social class system and their students and families will become visible. The methodology for this study is critical qualitative research which takes the perspective that the social class system in the United States is a closed system and allows upward movement only for a few. The urgency around this research is based on the current state of the economy and the fact that over the last ten years many school districts have had an increase in the number of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch. Children with fewer resources, which includes social, economic, and political, need different support systems. In some cases that may mean more, but in many cases it may mean a different approach to teaching and learning. Educators must have an open mind and the willingness to engage students and help them grow academically and socially.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Research Findings**

The following is a summary of the interviews that took place with the four participants. Much of the actual participant language is used to accurately reflect the conversations. What you are about to read is an excerpt of two very rich conversations that took place. The conversations between the participants took many complex turns throughout the discussions based on the responses to one another. I made the decision to include large portions of the discussion because of the depth and richness of the data. I believe that the use of videos elicited a higher level conversation than questions alone might have. While repetition was edited out, the conversations were too valuable to reduce down to simply representative quotes; doing so risked losing important insights.

The four participants were teachers in an urban high school in the Midwest. All four have taught exclusively for the same school district and have approximately six years of high school teaching experience. Three of them, Carol, Tom and Tomas, have content area classroom experience; Lisa has special education classroom experience. Two of the teachers and I had a working relationship for about two years. The first year I was their direct supervisor due to funding, and the second year we worked together but their principal was their direct supervisor. The teachers were in instructional coach roles, while I held a central office administrative role. Our working relationship was very collaborative as we were a team that developed the goals and plans together. As we worked together, I felt I had a good relationship with them, especially the two, and I instilled a great amount of trust in each. When I asked them if they knew of two other

people who would be willing to participate in the study, each thought they could get one person. Three of the teachers were colleagues with one another and had worked at the same school together for over two years; one had more recently joined the staff, but they all had a good working relationship.

The following themes emerged and will be discussed: (1) The connections between social class and achievement; (2) Calling on their experience as evidence for how they understand Social Class; (3) Identified problems of the lower, middle, and upper class; (4) The comparison of the Caste System with the United States Social Class System; (5) The identification of the social class system in schools; (6) Student understanding of how they fit in the social class system; (7) Values related to social class; (8) A systemic analysis of the institution of school and social class; (9) Standardized testing; and (10) Obligations;

The data have been arranged chronologically with a summary of the videos that were viewed to help generate deep thinking and discussion around the topics. The specific videos were chosen to assist the conversation to go beyond the surface level. Some extreme points of views are expressed to evoke sociopolitical thinking that at times may not otherwise be expressed.

### **The Connection Between Social Class and Achievement**

The school in which the study took place consisted of an overwhelming majority of students who qualified for free and reduced lunch. Due to this fact, I thought the teachers would be prime candidates to engage in a conversation about the social class system. The teachers were given the following opening discussion question: The research has been relatively clear about the connection between social class and achievement. What hasn't been clearly identified is how and why the connection exists. How would you explain the correlation between social class and achievement?

Carol started by saying, “I believe that one area is nutrition and with nutrition they are finding out more about the way the brain develops. When you are looking at foods that are cheaper they tend to have a lot of dye in them and a lot of chemicals that directly affect brain patterns, ADHD, and behavior. I think that impoverished communities don’t have the access to fresh veggies and fruit compared to elsewhere. Also it’s not necessarily as valued. There is talk about produce jungles where the closest food to the check-out is junk food.: Carol concluded her remarks by discussing the deficits children come to school with in regard to vocabulary. If the deficits are not addressed properly the children continue to fall behind.

Lisa jumped in at this point, “To piggy back off nutrition with so many children with special needs that are not getting a balanced nutrition, they are affected with learning disabilities. A lot of children in our environment, low income, there are a lot of students with lead poisoning.: She continued to then explain a situation with one her students. “I know of one student that has a high level of lead poisoning. She is in 12<sup>th</sup> grade and she is going to graduate with a 4<sup>th</sup> grade level.”

Tom’s opening statements was, “I am glad you said correlation and not causation. I think everyone can learn and be successful but I think our kids, in our setting, have a little more difficult time and I think there are tons of reasons why. He continued, “I would not have gone with nutrition, but I totally agree with it. I definitely think that is one factor...And I then think is it the chicken or the egg or the way they look at food? There are not Whole Foods in certain vicinities because foods have a short shelf life and they would spoil. People put businesses where they will make money. So if they don’t feel the food will sell there, then you are right. All you have in walking distance is the corner store with high fattening food. There are a lot of factors.”

Tom went on to express some of the difficulties with discussing this topic, he said, “I think I paused earlier because when you think about political correctness and I didn’t want to make generalizations to a whole group. But there are a lot of factors; poverty is a cycle and you cannot get out of it. I would assume if you look at the data the students that are impoverished have parents that don’t have college degrees. Their parents were very young when they had them. So, if I am someone who is not educated and I can’t take care of myself and I am having multiple children, and then I definitely can’t take care of them. That is a cycle most difficult to break.:

**Analysis.** At this point there were only three participants as Tomas had not yet arrived. The dialogue to this point was based on factual information that the participants had read at some point. Tom indicated some sensitivity to the conversation by the way he began the conversation. As this was the very beginning, participants may not have been ready to make statements that were not backed by something they had read or researched.

### **Experience as Evidence for Understanding Social Class**

I asked the participants how they come to know these to be truths? What evidence did they have to support what they’ve said? They immediately turned to their lives and their families as their sources of their knowledge about social class.

Carol explained, “I have a family member that has struggled her whole life. She is below the poverty line, is a single mom, with six children. We actually just had this conversation about how hard it is for her to afford healthy food choices. I always post on Facebook about preservatives and dyes and she always comments how it is very hard to have access to healthy foods. She doesn’t own a vehicle and doesn’t get to the grocery store very often. She often buys ramen noodle and macaroni and cheese. She talks about her neighbors doing the same thing. ”

Lisa described how she knew this to be true by explaining her understanding in the current research and through the special education evaluation process. She then continued, “Personally I have been at the poverty level. I have had food stamps. I had child care assistance, but I was a huge advocate as a parent. As a parent and a teacher I taught my children to know better – I didn’t mean that—to know and instill reading. From reading at night and promoting academics. My children saw me as a student, as an adult going back to school. That in turn made them better students.: She concluded with the importance of having empathy and being a good listener with students in an urban setting. She emphasized how many times students just need someone to care and listen when they struggle.

Tom looked at Lisa and said, “I appreciate you sharing.: He then continued, “I grew up with a single mom and I remember the church delivering these black and white packages with food and these really less desirable toys. We really struggled and we grew up like that and my mom really pushed school and stressed to us education and she wanted us to have a better life than her.:

The fourth participant, Tomas, had entered at this point in the conversation. I caught him up him up with a summary. I then reminded the group that the study is about social class in general and I asked, “what are the challenges that the students in middle class face?: The stories continued to draw on the participants’ own life histories, except for Tomas, who described poverty in terms of structural analysis.

Carol started by saying, “peer pressure is a big challenge. I was lower middle class but went to a private school. My parents struggled to put me there. A lot of the people that attended were wealthy, so that was a struggle for me; like living between both worlds. I bet that’s a struggle (for the wealthy) and maybe the parents pushing them in performance for perfection.”



Carol's connection to her own status now turned the conversation for the others. Lisa began by saying, "I grew up in a middle class household. I went to school in the city, but it was parochial. I had five siblings and that was a struggle. My mom was a teacher and my dad a postal worker, so we weren't by any means upper middle class.: She continued to describe the school she went to as a small community school where there was a lot of pressure to get good grades. She then went to a community college but said she didn't know the value until she was forced into the situation to provide more for herself. She finished by going back to the question about pressures the middle class face, "peer pressure. I think the pressure they have is with different kinds of drugs; those not accessible to the lower income kids like heroin and more harmful drugs. I think peer pressure is huge when it comes to middle class kids and their parents.:

Tom now explained his status as vacillating between lower and middle class. "I think we teeter between lower class and maybe lower middle. I think the one thing for me personally is reflecting on how the kids had cars when I couldn't afford one. They had a lot of things like shoes and things like that where I always felt like...I think you always gravitate toward friends that are a little more like you too. So you feel like you weren't as good as those kids or you didn't have some of the things you couldn't relate to those kids and they would let you know it too, very clear about that. In more generalization terms if you're lower class you get a lot of subsidies and support than if you are just above poverty. You are busting your tail to make it and then you have nothing more than if you weren't working. My wife has stayed home with our children for the last 5 years and is now looking for a job. They pay only 10 dollars an hour and then babysitting is 10 dollars an hour. You better love your job because it's going to cost us money. I think that if she were a single mom and trying to support her kids it's almost better

financially to stay at home and work for cash. I can see how it is better to stay at home or work for cash. It's almost better than to work and get the assistance in the lower class."

Lisa answered, "One time I worked two jobs and made \$14 more one year than the last. That year I couldn't get utility assistance. Tom commented, "not worth it to work.": Carol then replied, "that was one thing we knew we weren't going to get much. My parents made too much so that was pressure on me to get good grades for scholarships. I was applying for everything I could and trying to outperform.:

Tomas, who had been silent up to this point, shifted the conversation from personal experience to broader social structures. He began, "It's interesting when you said middle class, I was going to ask you how you defined middle class because I don't think there is a middle class any more. If you look historically at the neo-liberal policies in the 1980s were enacted, kind of like where we are at now, you have a really wide gap between the poor and the rich. So you start creating more people that are richer and more that are poorer. I like how you talk about the example that it is better to live below the poverty level because you have access to more resources. Everyone wants more resources no matter what the issues. I think that is purposely done to separate us. To create the dual classes instead of supposedly the classes that we have. I don't think the middle class exists anymore. It's becoming really wide. And you see that like you mentioned about finding jobs if you don't have---even if you have a quality education----doesn't mean/guarantee you have a job.:

"But there are a lot of issues, like housing is a big one. Housing connects to the schooling and so when the question you were asking about what are issues that middle class students are or might have to deal with, it is more of an issue of housing like segregation. Cities are more segregated today than ever before. Blacks are here, Latinos, whites. And so I would say there is a

lack of connection to other cultures. It is weird because the schools are set up for the norms of white middle class values. The way you act, the way you dress and talk. Then if you don't fit that description you can't be part of that school. Think about how we run our schools, that's what it's based on. If you don't fit that norm your suspended or you're breaking the rules or whatever and sometimes the rules are not that clear or written out—they come out of the top of our head. It is like, 'I don't appreciate your behavior that does not come out of middle class white values.' But the big issue is diversity. We are really segregated and we don't know about different people.”

**Analysis.** When the participants were asked how they knew these to be truths, three of them supported their opinions with experiences they personally had either growing up within their family or with other family members. The personal experiences they began to share marks the beginning of the importance of the personal narrative and how that shapes their thinking. Carol, Lisa and Tom rely heavily on their personal reality to explain phenomena. Tomas, on the other hand, joined the conversation late, which may have contributed to him not sharing a personal experience. He immediately described his analysis of the structural issues in society with regard to poverty and social class. As the conversation unfolded, Tom's insights into the social class system began to shed light on his thinking even more.

### **The Struggles of the Affluent**

I then asked about the affluent children, what challenges do they face? Carol laughed a little when she answered, “Which pair of shoes are they going to wear....: “No, I went to school with a lot of affluent kids and am still friends with a lot of them. It's kind of hard to relate to them. I am thinking of someone who posted on her Facebook page a picture of this Louis Vuitton box and the caption read, “This better be the one I wanted.” I was like, ‘that purse would buy me

a new car probably.' I don't know, I would say just keeping up appearances.: She then further explained, "I do know someone that took their own life and they came from a very affluent family. His house had a basketball court in it and the house was the size of a block. He did that because growing up he didn't know who he was or what he wanted to do. His father wanted him to take over the family business and he felt pressure to conform to that.: She ended thinking, "so I think maybe conformity might be?"

Lisa responded, "Right, I think if you are in that situation and you might not fit the expectations that your parents have for you. Maybe you want to be more creative, or if you do not want be what the business person and you want to be an artist or journalist. You may not want to make a whole lot of money, but you just want to be different from what your family wants you to be. I don't know anyone that has a basketball court in their house. We have a basketball court in our playground across the street.: She ended by saying that she really doesn't know, pressure to go to Ivy League schools and it depends on how much pressure your parents place on you. She reiterated, "you don't want to be a disappointment to you parents in any class.: Carol continued, "it's interesting we're talking about this. It's easier for me to stereotype impoverished/poverty than rich. It is much easier to pin point.:

Lisa then stated, "That's what we're exposed to in our workplace. We know, you know (pointing to me), I have never worked in a suburban school so I don't know what those pressures might be. I know my kids are worried about how they are getting home, what they are going to eat and are they wearing the right clothes. They are not worried about the things I am worried about; is their homework done, do they have their grades in line, so they have scholarships. They don't worry about those things. They need their basic needs met before they can ever get to those other needs like college and graduating."

Tomas returned to the question about the affluent students, “I don’t think they have any problems. I mean we live in a capitalist society. That’s what we want. Everyone wants to be rich and have everything. I know people that are very wealthy. Most of them aren’t happy. When I talk with people, like us sharing our stories, if we suffer a little bit we appreciate what we have. A lot of people that don’t suffer don’t appreciate what they have. That’s kinda like an ideology thing. I feel like if know your parents work hard and work 12 hours a day, 6 days a week, you will too. So here I am a ‘professional’ and trying to work 12 hours a day, not that I have to, but I feel I have to because that what’s they did. Not so if you’re wealthy; that’s how the system is set up and to benefit, you know, the American dream. Goes back to the issue of segregation, if you separate yourself.:

Tom replied, “I just think to make an assumption would be pressure to maintain status. Just listening to ourselves, making blanket statements, is really dangerous because if someone is all of sudden is wealthy. My uncle is a psychiatrist in a city nearby. He lives in a really nice home on a golf course and I would say I would consider him pretty wealthy. But he grew up on a farm. He was the first one in his family to go to college. I am the second one from my family that graduated from college. So he made his wealth. He has a little girl and she is not being taught that it is her right to have everything and that she is a little princess. She is being told, there is hard work and values. So I think the 7th generation of silver spoon in your mouth versus someone that is self-made. Those kids may not have the same level of appreciation.”

Carol added, “I think it really resonated for me that there is a difference and I never really thought about the way social class fits in with education, like the point where teachers treat kids of different social classes differently. Especially, if that teacher doesn’t have experience with that class and it can go in both ways. I found that a teacher who was raised upper middle class treats

kids that are in upper middle class differently. She is harsher with them and prefers not to be around them. She says she has to stop herself and she did mention race. She said she is harsher on the white middle class students from the suburbs. She feels like this because she was around wealthy people growing up and they had so much more opportunity handed to them. She said, she saw them getting out of tickets in high school. They could just go to daddy and daddy was on the school board. So she started to notice she was not as warm to students in the upper middle class.”

I asked Carol if she thought that was the norm, and she said, “in some ways, yes.”

**Analysis.** While three of the participants earlier identified and appeared to relate to a particular social class, none provided evidence they identified with the affluent students. Their responses indicated there appears to be no real issues within this social class. Possibly a pressure to fit in – or fit a particular way of living, but the affluent students are afforded more advantages. Tomas doesn’t think they have any issues, since we live in a capitalistic society and everyone wants to be rich. Tom indicated a difference in the generations who inherit their wealth versus his uncle who made his wealth. Here, Tom does bring out the structural differences between the one percent and the upper middle class, indicating there is a work ethic in obtaining wealth for some.

The participants draw on personal experiences to try to make sense of something they are not very familiar with. Each draws upon personal experiences they can directly relate to the question or situation. What appears are experiences that have made an impact on each of the participants. One observation I made is that experiences that stick out in our memory help shape our thinking about complex systems such as social class.

## **Comparing the Caste System to the United States Social Class System**

The next video excerpt we viewed was from The Center for New American Media (2001) documentary titled, *People Like Us: Social Class in America*. This video gives viewers a glimpse in the lives of people living within the complex social class system in the United States. Different families are profiled; those living in a Park Avenue penthouse in New York City, those living in the Appalachian trailer parks, and those living in suburban gated housing areas. The excerpt the group watched was of a plumber discussing his point of view and wanting to be treated the same as men in dressed in suits. He states the American social class system is comparable to a caste system. He says we don't want to admit it, but we live separately, pointing out that you don't see them going to church together or socializing together. I chose this particular segment in which a plumber explains he thinks the social class system is a Caste System because when I hear people talk about poverty and how "those people" need to just get a job, I think about the ramifications of our current system. I thought hearing it from someone of the working class may have more of an impact than me making the comparison.

Carol started off our discussion by agreeing with the plumber, that she didn't really think about it. "I don't think people of different classes hang out as much. I do because I went to a private school, but I wouldn't choose to. I don't know why really. When I think about who my friends are, who I am social with, who I hang out with, they are very similar to me. Middle Class."

Tom and Lisa agreed. Tom explained, "Yeah, it's natural. I am not going to hang out with a group of people who want to go to Alaska to go bear hunting because I can't afford that. And I think that is part of the reason we are going to do things in our own class system like the hobbies and certain things we can afford, right?"

Carol stated, "or have the same belief system."

Tom continued, “yeah for sure. I mean there are a lot of overlaps and I think people just want to sit. That’s why you see a lot of friends that look a lot like their other friends, right?”

Tomas, Lisa and Carol nod in agreement. “This isn’t a judgment. Kids that have the chain or chain wallets and the dark make up with black clothes, we have a couple at our school, and they usually walk side by side. And I think I looked a lot like my friends in high school. People just gravitate where there is comfort right? There is safety in numbers that is why fly strips fill up pretty fast because...but I don’t...mean...I think it’s a very natural thing.”

Lisa explained, “I have had my friend since I was 13 years old. I have known her for 33 years and she is now in the upper middle class. They own their own company and they live in a huge 5000 square foot house. There are times, even though I have known her and she is my best friend, where I feel uncomfortable because I am a single parent, I am divorced and work for the public school system, my kids don’t go to a parochial school or a private college—well maybe they will. There are times, and no disrespect to her, that her and her friends look at me in a different way; because I live in the city, and I would be considered middle class or lower middle class. There have been certain looks, just the perception of who I am. I may be putting it on myself, I don’t know, but it has happened.:

Tomas responded, “Three things came to me, when we were talking about middle class. Sometimes we define it by how much money you make but there is a difference between income and wealth. Wealth is something that is usually committed through families through inheritance. You know, own land, own property, what counts as wealth is not just the income you make. I mean I make a lot of good money but I don’t have wealth.”

“One thing that came to mind was when you said it was kind of natural to gravitate to people, I think that happens but I always feel it’s not natural. It’s done on purpose because you



segregate people through housing. Once you start creating social networks you don't have access to certain resources. For example, like your friend (pointing to Lisa) when you hang out with her and you talk with her friends, they create social capital. They have connections of jobs and resources (Carol agrees...yes, yes). You can buy a house—here--you can get a loan. You mentioned your uncle (to Tomas) challenged you with the meritocracy. It is really a myth, 'if you work hard you'll get there.' If you look at Blacks, if you look at women, that's not happening. But historically our country has purposely segregated people that have taken away certain advantages to whatever economical system there is."

"That idea of meritocracy I don't believe it because it's all about who you know and what you know and the connections that you build. If I hang out with people who are wealthy, I am going to have access to a lot more resources. So you continue to recycle within that group and that's why the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. I think it's access to different resources. You know I always tell people that is the reason I am teacher. It's kind of weird when you think about it. As a teacher I get paid by public funds. I am not working for a corporation especially, those in mathematics, if you look for a company we could make double what we're making. But we are not making the rich richer, we are making the poor richer."

"I keep thinking about it, you know I just have a different perception of how your association with different people makes you create social capital. I know a lot of people. I have friends that have so much money they don't know what to do with it. Honestly they just say what am I going to do with my money? I say (hands gesturing toward himself) Give it to me, scholarships....but it's weird that people will say that, you know that's kind of offensive that people like that and I know people that starve and have lived in poverty.: Tomas explained he never thought of himself as poor. "I never thought I was poor, but then when you start thinking

back, you are kind of surprised right, like, that you were poor. There were some things that were rough. It's funny, I think it's your context when you grow up and not have certain things when you appreciate them more.:

**Analysis.** Tomas continued to point to the structural underpinnings of society that were there to intentionally keep the social hierarchies in place. Tom, on the other hand, tends to see people hanging out with others who can afford the same things as them as natural, while Tomas see it as created. Lisa suggested something different, that people may look down on people in lower social classes and those in lower classes may feel uncomfortable around people with a lot of money. Carol thinks people hang around with others who are like them because it makes them feel comfortable. These are very different kinds of attributions to explain the same phenomenon.

### **Social Class in the Classroom**

Lisa began this line of discussion by explaining that she agrees that social class is definitely reflected in the classroom. “Yes, I think a lot; even right from the beginning of the day, they come here to receive free meals, some two meals a day. They can’t afford having breakfast at home. That’s a big struggle for them. They need nourishment and the nutrition to get their day going. They are worried about what happened last night, was there a shooting last night, so they are worried about safety issues. They’re worried about their education (hesitation). In the lower levels there isn’t as much pressure to perform. It depends on the students. Some students, and I have seen success stories, don’t want to live the way their parents have. They want to break the cycle and get out of the pattern. So I see a lot that in the classroom. Where I could say one thing, like you need to sharpen your pencil, and then they go off on me. Something has happened that causes their reaction—their parents got in an argument last night or their mom’s boyfriend and he got it in and there was some kind of violence in their neighborhood. Same with gangs. There is a lot of gangs in the school and they are worried about that. Being in gang, being accepted in a

gang, it's just basic survival skills. Maybe they are worried about more of those survival skills in the school setting that they are about academics. But I truly believe this (school) is a safe environment for them then in their neighborhood or being at home."

Carol adds, "I definitely can see it in the classroom. However most of the schools that I have worked in, you don't see the higher social class. You only see poverty, lower middle class and working class. But within that you can see definite distinctions. I have seen distinctions in the way teachers who are generally middle class treat students in a lower class.:

I asked Carol to explain a little bit about the kids and their distinctions and the teachers and their distinctions, she continues.

"Well reflecting on the quote, 'these people don't even go to church together,' you can see that in the classroom and the hallways. You can definitely see that. Especially with the kids who are truly, truly, poor and neglected. The lowest class is treated differently, like comments and avoidance, by other kids. Kids who might be in the same class but keep up appearances; they have the right clothes and fit, but it might not reflect that in their home life. They have the appearance of another class; those kids hang with the middle class."

"I have seen teachers who can't relate. They come from middle to upper class and they can't relate with the lower class or impoverished. The kid might say a reference and the teacher doesn't get it thinks that the kid is just being a jerk. Or they didn't know the student slept in a group home and the teacher would say, well too bad, they still have to get their work done. I don't care, they just have to get there. The teacher just can't relate to what the kid is going through and the approach may be different if the teacher had different experiences."

Tom explained, "the range is as wide as in the overall community or city. 10% of our kids don't get FRL (free or reduced lunch). So 10% of our kids are paying for their lunch. There

is a boy that comes to my class a couple times a week asking for food or Gatorade and most days he's wearing the same sweatshirt, same hoodie, and you feel for him. You know it has to be hard. I never see any kids look at him. The kids recognize that stuff too, if you wear the same shirt every day, same pants every day. Then some of the kids look like they are going to the prom directly after school. And they are trying to have this appearance.

**Analysis.** The participants show their understanding of the poverty level by acknowledging the difficulties children face. They are empathetic to children's situations. Those who don't have enough to eat and those who are treated poorly by teachers who lack the understanding of the issues that children at the poverty level face on a daily basis. The comments indicate that the social class system is very evident in the classroom.

### **Student's Understanding of Their Position in the Social Class System**

I asked the next questions, "do students know what social class they belong to? Do teachers know what social class students belong to?" Tomas began, nodding, "It's funny at the beginning of the year when I get to know my students, I try as much as possible not only to get to know them but their parents. It's funny how they share a lot of what my parents went through. They have older brothers and sisters and the parents are working full time 12 hours a day 6 days a week for below minimum wage. And the immigrant families who are undocumented, they then make even less than them; close to slave labor. The first thing when I meet the parents they tell me, 'you know we don't have much but we do with what we have.' I say to them, 'you do a lot because with the little bit of money you make, I don't know how you support your five, six kids. You don't have public support; you don't have services from the government, so you are pretty much surviving. You pay rent, pay your bills, pay your car.'"

"So when I talk to kids of about issues of income I don't think they know that they are poor. I don't think they know they are segregated. When you think about it, when we are

younger we are within the same income group.: Tomas continued to explain his belief that when students see what other students have, like cars, that's when they begin to make comparisons and wonder why their parents don't provide things like that to them. He concluded with, "In reality, I don't think kids really know that they are living apart. They come here to take advantages of the resources they have here, but I don't think they have learned to accept how they live."

Tomas then shared an example from his college years. He talked about a friend of his who was living in an apartment. They would get together and cook but one day he remembered her crying. When he asked her why, she told him that here she is, living in this big apartment and her mom, dad and four siblings are living in a garage--she felt guilty. He concluded by saying, "Once you your segregated area you realize there is another world. I feel our kids really don't know the big difference because they are segregated.:

Tomas provided another example from when he was coaching the swim team and they were visiting a parochial school. He explained the reactions of his students to the facility and resources, like uniforms, that the students at the parochial school received. Another coach got angry with Tomas when he said to the students, "Yeah, this is like a jail for the rich kids and the poor kids go across the freeway.: He told the coach this is truth: "the rich kids can afford to go to the military school and the poor kids go to public school.: He concluded by telling how the students say to him, "you buy us T-shirts, you take us out to eat, and he said yes, I get my check as a coach and I bought them that stuff." His concluding comment was, "There is a big difference, but kids don't see that until they are out of their context. "

Tomas continued, "I have talked even this last week with some of my students, when we are talking about if you are considered poor, I tell them given the standards of the US you are considered poor because you live with a single parent, there are three or four brother/sisters."

They don't think they are poor because that is their upbringing. I never thought I was poor, but then when you start thinking back, you are kind of surprised right, like, that you were poor, there were some things that were rough. It's funny, I think it's your context when you grow up and not have certain things when you appreciate them more. Actually the principal told me one time, he said, 'I wish I could grab a lot of these kids and take them to the countries I have been to so they can see how other kids live.' I told him, I think a lot of the immigrant kids who come to the US, you see them and they are very eager to learn, go to school and are appreciative of everything they have."

**Analysis.** Tomas explains that students don't know they are poor until they are exposed to the other social classes. He indicated here for the first time that, for him, it wasn't until later that he realized he was poor. Carol previously stated how the students mistreat others who don't dress the same, which was example of how students begin to understand their ranking in the social class system. In the next section Tom reiterates that he doesn't think students know about social class until high school. But then there is a shift in the conversation to a focus on values and norms of the lower social classes. The participants are no longer answering questions, but some of their beliefs are surfaced through the dialogue.

### **Social Class and Values**

This is where the conversation takes a shift to *values*, from whether the students know their social class to the norms of low SES environments.

Lisa started by explaining that students are not exposed to experience other environments. "They are so 'in' their environment and the reality is this is the way things are. It is like when you talked about the cycle (pointing to Tomas). I remember this one student talking to me about his Quest card and he was excited that his Quest card got 50 more dollars on it. He said well that's free money and then we had to have the conversation about how I used to get Quest cards

and it's a temporary thing to fill those needs and everything. No one sits down and teaches them that. He just thinks its free money and he was exited to get more. I had to explain to him that these programs are set up to help you but it's not a thing that you want to be on forever. You want to get a job and use your skills and be off the system. But like it was stated, I really don't think they know how poor they are. I think some students do, but I don't think a lot of them really understand. They are not exposed to another environment. I went back to my old high school and it's like the Taj Mahal. Things you take for granted, like a clean bathroom and soap. And we don't have that at this school. Things you take for granted when you go to a suburban high school that you don't have in an urban school."

Tom went on to point out that it is "more about expectations too.: "We have money for soap, we have money for paper towels, and we don't often have those things. It's not a money issue it's an expectation issue. It's accountability.: He went on to explain the student's perception to social class. "I feel a lot of the kids know when they reach this age. I don't think I thought about where I sat until I was in high school. I think the younger kids don't have any idea and that's normal. I think the world is so small, and the fake jewelry, there is definitely a portrayal of wealth because they are definitely trying to portray it, so they know what it looks like.:

"The world is so small they can watch movies, TV and the Internet. They know things exist out there. I think a lot of our kids know what they don't have what's out there. For me it falls back to parents. If the Quest card is taught, 'here is your free money' and it's a hustle in some way, that is such an injustice to those kids. Another example is when people come to make the home visits for the SSI checks. There was a staff member that was at a house when they

visited and the mom said, “Remember that’s when you play retarded.: The mom was telling her kids, remember when he gets here you play retarded so you can get your money.”

Lisa added, “You pretend you don’t know how to read. I have had a student tell me that his mom said you cannot read; you tell him you cannot read that.: Tom then said, “What are you teaching that kid? That is the base issue, you are perpetuating, you are setting your own kid up for failure.: Lisa then said, “No self-respect.: Tom continued, “that’s what we are going to do, we are going to lie to get free money which is the furthest from the truth.” Lisa continued, “Well the whole thing is the system. Someone taught that person how to work the system. This is what you do to get that SSI check.: Tom added, “My mom wouldn’t do that. She would ask her dad for money, swallow her pride. She wouldn’t steal or lie or do anything unethical like that.”

Lisa begins, “It comes with the values of the parenting. That’s what it all comes down to. I mean a single family or having a father. I didn’t come from a single home but I am a single parent. But if I don’t instill those values and responsibilities and respect for you in my children, they are not going to be productive citizens. I could say to my children, ‘this is what we are going to be doing, we are going to be living at poverty level.’ Instead I am going to be instilling the fact that I have to go back to school and I have to provide as a parent. I have to show you how to do this and work hard. So as young children they see me do that. I don’t know if they would be as good of students as they are right now.:

Lisa continued, “Going through that struggle really helps the foundation and coming out of that on top. And in no way am I a wealthy person, but I don’t have to worry as much, which is huge. These kids have a lot of worry about basic needs. But if there is nobody pushing them to be better, even a teacher pushing them to be better, or a parent, or a mentor or whoever, it’s hard for them to get out of where they are, to dig themselves out.:



Lisa continued, “Sometimes I see the teachers being really hard on the students in this environment. I taught at a totally different, upper middle class school in the recreation department. There was much more parent involvement, less factors having to do with poverty, less safety issues, and that was the norm.: She continued, “I think we had good conversations. What Carol brought to the table made me reflect on me being at the poverty level and trying to build a family foundation and instill values. I see that in my students. Especially now that graduation is coming. I think some of them should not be graduating. It’s an entitlement thing. They come here, they do some work and they think they should be graduating. I did discuss with a couple of my friends who are from a suburb. And it was very much a race issue with the discussion and how “African Americans” are entitled to certain things.:

She went on, “It was the kind of discussion I didn’t think would happen with these friends of mine. But it did, and I value other people’s opinions. And I see it on the frontline, what’s going on, so I think I have more experience with what’s going on in the education with this school population. It was an interesting take on what they think is going on here and what’s reality.:

I asked, “what did they think was going on here?”

Lisa answered, “They thought the students got a lot of handouts and that they come whenever they want. We have a lot of really good kids and that’s what you have to focus on as an educator. Trying to build on those positive relationships and motivate them to become their better selves. And, they (her friends) thought it was just a free for all and not a lot of teaching going on. I have walked into classrooms where the teacher is not teaching as well as they could. The blame goes both ways. It goes on parents, goes on educators, environment, society, poverty.

There is a lot of things you can throw the blame at. It was interesting to see that a lot of the factor that they said was race.”

Carol then shared an experience with us. “I was teaching in a middle school for six years and I have a really good friend who’s African American, and she is a very successful, really strong woman; very vocal. The principal came up to her and said, ‘you know I am getting a lot of complaints from parents about you. Don’t you think you should lower standards? I think you are expecting too much.’ And she said, ‘Are you kidding me?’ And the principal said to her, ‘You are black, you know you should lower the standards for these kids.’ She wrote a letter to the paper and quoted the principal in there and she sent it to the school board. She was so upset. Because she feared, what if this is a prevalent thought? Let’s lower the expectations for these poor black kids? She was so upset what this principal said this to her.”

Tomas finished the session with the following: “You also mentioned the teachers; I think in general teachers tend to reflect on their own background, like we are. And I don’t think we realize the backgrounds of our students are different. Sometimes we cannot have the same expectations, not just behavior, but when we talk to them and the way we treat them. Some people say they don’t have values, because we have our own “values.” I always feel there is a mismatch between home culture and the school culture. So I think that sometimes teachers, even though they are aware of the issues students are coming from, they still force the middle class, white, values. So again, if the kid doesn’t think, dress, act, behave, like a middle class, white person, you are breaking the rules. Again, the model of my idea of schools as an institution is to maintain the status quo.”

Tomas continued, “Then if you look back historically, the schools reproduce the status quo with the way students are reprimanded, order, different curriculums, and the way things are

taught. You are really focusing on controlling the students rather than really teaching them. Goes back to the first question, is there difference in teaching and there really is. If you go to different districts, they don't teach the same way, they don't have the same expectations. An example is when I coached swimming. Another coach said to me he admired the way I coached and I asked why. He said that when kids come to him they have been swimming their whole lives, gone to camps etc., I am like conducting an orchestra. "But, when kids come to you, you are really teaching them. The first day of practice you teach them to swim and float and then when your kids make the progression they have made, they can beat my kids with all the money and time they have spent preparing. It is really a miracle."

**Analysis.** Family values and parenting was a theme that emerged throughout the study and was evident in the above section. Each participant recognized the difficulties that students at the poverty level face. Tomas even mentions the idea of middle class values being forced on the students. He is referring to the idea that there are structures in place in schools which exacerbate the inequalities in the social class system. At the same time, there is mention of a sense of entitlement, in the discussion of the Quest Cards being "free money" and graduation. The underlying values of the work ethic is so engrained in the working and middle class and is such an inherent part of schooling that the teachers are not even aware of their own biases as they make these points. Personal stories of growing up with parents enforcing the idea of "earning it," and the possibility that parents at the poverty level don't share that same belief is shared, but not examined. Lowered expectations were discussed with regard to race, and race was brought up when Lisa was discussing the conversation with her friends. While race was not a focus in this study, race is ever a component of the social class system.

## **Standardized Testing**

The group members then watched a YouTube video titled, Diane Ravitch Defends Teachers and Public Education. Diane Ravitch is a professor of education at New York State University. She worked under President George Herbert Walker Bush's Secretary of State Lamar Alexander, as well as under President William Jefferson Clinton's administration. She served on the National Assessment Board and held the Brown Chair in Education for the Brookings Institute.

In the clip she starts by naming a study by ETS (Educational Testing Service), The Black and White Achievement Gap; When Progress Stopped. ETS is a non-profit organization that works with educational organizations to provide assessments and conduct research. She began saying that standardized assessment, such as, ACT or SAT, demonstrate a correlation between poverty and test scores. The richest kids score at the top and the poorest kids score at the bottom. She then discussed how it is often reported that the United States does so poorly on International Assessments. She points out that in schools with low amounts of poverty, the US out performed Finland, Japan, and Korea. In US schools with 25% poverty, the US scored equivalent to Finland, Japan and Korea. "As the proportion of poor kids grows, the test scores go down.:

There is a cartoon that flashes on the screen. It is from Ed Week and has a picture of a man sitting at a desk outside by a tree. Animals (bird, chimpanzee, penguin, elephant, fish, seal and dog) are lined up in front of him and he is quoted saying, "For a fair selection everyone has to take the same exam; Please climb that tree.: The caption reads, "What test should you give to a bird, a chimpanzee, a penguin, an elephant, a fish, a seal and a dog? She references No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, and how this legislation deemed that by 2014 100% of students will be proficient or school districts will face sanctions such as firing principals, firing teachers and closing schools to turn over to private entities. She quoted current Secretary of Education,

Arne Duncan, that 82% of our schools will be failing. The clip ended with her stating, “this is the most ridiculous piece of legislation passed by Congress.”

After we finished watching the video, I asked the group, “The cartoon that flashed on the screen had animals and only one was really equipped to complete the task. This epitomizes her message in the beginning of the video and when she said, ‘I know I am not supposed to say poverty is the cause.’ What are your thoughts?”

Carol began, “When you say equipped, I really do agree with that. Now there are exceptions to the rule, every rule.:

Carol then discussed the research she read. She began with the vocabulary and explaining there is a 50,000-word gap between children of poverty and other children. She continued that the gap continues to increase as the children get older and she attests that to the lack of vocabulary teaching in school. She went on say, “I have always had a big push at teaching vocabulary. And when you look at impoverished neighborhoods, you are looking at a lot of single family homes where the mom is working a lot and doesn’t have the time to spend with her child, reading or teaching. Then you are seeing a lot of drug culture, where the mom or dad or grandmother, is not spending time with that child in the early formative years. So they start out with a deficit, and then you are not seeing that drive and push to say that “hey” education is important. So there is a deficit too. So it is really hard not to blame poverty.”

Lisa then responded, “well when I am thinking while Carol is talking I am thinking about the special education students I work with; their vocabulary level is even lower than many of their peers in this school. And even if you take our school and compare it to a school down the street, they are both city schools but our students are so much lower. The skill level and just basic things we take as a teacher for granted they already know. They should have learned that in

2nd grade, 3rd grade and 6th grade. All those background skills they need to build on, and that's where I think our students get frustrated. That, as a professional teacher, I don't slow down and teach the basic skills as much as I should. But there is such a push to get everything done."

Lisa continued to explain how students with special needs get frustrated with standardized tests which then leads to a lack of motivation. The students lack the support from the family due to the lack of the traditional family structure and basic needs. She added that there is not emphasis on education and, therefore, the students lack a role model. She also reiterated the idea that if students wake up thinking about getting their basic needs met, eating, clothing, etc., they will continue to struggle in school.

In response to students not getting what they need, Carol added, "That's why I talk about small schools when you're in a more urban inner-city impoverished area. Make it smaller schools where you can meet those needs and you have more resources for them. Like everyone gets to talk to the school psychiatrist, everyone gets a chance with the social worker. Everyone gets those needs met. If you think about it, when I was going through a rough period with losing my dad and my mom was sick, it was really tough for me to work, I would come and do my job, but my heart was not in it and it was really tough. And I was not the caliber of person and employee that I like to think I usually am, during that time. So when you think about our kids in poverty neighborhoods, they are experiencing this type of thing all the time. But then they have to come to a regular setting and a regular school and do regular work. They have all this on their shoulders and they have to take care of it. I think a lot of our kids are suffering from post-traumatic stress, but they don't have any way to help get it out. They don't have enough art, especially in elementary schools to help them express it or have another way for that nervous energy to exude."

Carol added, “They don’t ever know what they are feeling. The fight or flight. That’s why a lot of our students flip out when you say, “hey, can you put away your cell phone?” and they react because they are always turned on, in that fight or flight. And teachers who don’t understand this, at no fault of their own often times, they are just not equipped to deal with that type of student. When you are in such a high poverty neighborhood you have to be honest. What students are seeing, we don’t see, what they are feeling, we don’t feel. I remember teaching and the kids would come back and tell me stories, like, “Ms, I didn’t get my homework done last night because they were cutting up cocaine on the table and I had to take out my little sister so she wouldn’t be around. I was just worried all night because they were playing loud music.” Carol continued, “I mean that is her mom.”

Lisa added, “It is like reverse roles. I have had students tell me when I ask them why they smell like marijuana and they will tell me, well my mom was smoking weed this morning. And then we go on with class business? Let’s start with a warm up?”

At this point, Carol and Lisa began a short dialogue about how the standardized tests are written for upper middle class students. One example was the use of idioms; such as willie nillie. I then asked, “what is our obligation as public educators to try to combat what you just talked about – our obligation to our children in poverty with huge challenges they face?:

Lisa answered, “As a public educator I feel like you have to serve all children and give them the best education that you can that you can do. We are not always given those tools.: I then interjected, “so we may be lacking the tools, but then I go back to Diane Ravitch, and she says the gap in testing due to the poverty level.:

Carol then discussed the model in Finland and Sweden, and she explained that as some of the top countries for education, they pour all their money into the most impoverished areas. She said, “they treat their teachers like heroes.:

Lisa asked Carol, “do they have like the same environment like our students?:

Carol responded, “Yes. They believe those are the kids that need all the resources. But I personally believe that this won’t change until your second question is answered and society says, ‘hey wait a minute, let’s put more resources into the front end of these neighborhoods because education really is our best tool. Let’s pool our resources and have smaller class sizes, let’s have the best teachers at the hardest schools, let’s treat those teachers like gold because it is the hardest, let’s admit it’s harder, let’s admit that these kids are different and need more.’ But society has to see that. I have people that are like, ‘oh, inner city?’ No, you should be like, ‘wait this is our future, all of our future, this is our city we want to make it good.’”

Lisa then states, “make it better, even better.:

Carol continues, “How do we be proactive by getting our younger kids and not letting the poverty spread out and get bigger? Which it is, they are saying it is when I just read that little booklet. As the poverty level increases our test scores reflect that and what are we doing? We are throwing those teachers under the bus. I have heard people say, ‘well those teachers aren’t that good. What? Yes, in some cases, yes...but there are some crappy teachers in the suburbs.’”

Tom then spoke up, “My understanding is we test all of our kids and a lot of other countries do not. And also there are certain countries that after 10<sup>th</sup> grade if you are not on the higher education track, your public funded schooling, or your schooling, stops. I don’t think it’s apples to apples for sure. But I thought it was actually encouraging, what she was saying a lot of our poor kids do better than other really impoverished kids in other countries. If we have a three



to one ration or if 25% of kids are impoverished, we are doing as well. But when that balance flips in the schools we serve here in our city too we see that. There are a lot of correlations, test scores poverty and there is a reason why the test scores are low, and there are certain behaviors that are associated with that. And there is a certain critical mass that think that when you have enough kids that think don't think education is for them or they have given up on education. Just to be completely honest, you see the level of disruption is also correlated with that. So you have, doesn't need to be half, there is no magic numbers, but you have a quarter or a third of the kids in your classroom aren't focused on learning, aren't putting in their effort, they are distracting for others, I see it every day; there are so many instructional minutes lost to redirecting behaviors that I don't think some other places have to deal with what we do.: I then replied, "when you talk about the redirecting of behaviors---you say there is a correlation, poverty and disruption---can you elaborate on that thinking."

Tom continued, "I don't know if poverty is necessarily it but I think everything is tied together with, not to sound cold but, as matter of fact that one thing that jumped out at me was when she said the rich kids are attaining the knowledge or the education and the poor kids don't and that we have to find a way to break that because obviously that makes a lot of sense and it perpetuates the people with the skill set and the knowledge are going to be able to do more high level jobs and critical thinking skills that are tied with it. If you don't have those skills, you are not as valued to the work force you are not going to have those high paying jobs and it makes a lot of sense those things are highly correlated.:

I asked, "we said poverty--- can you stretch it to say social class as well?"

Tom said, “Yes, I don’t have the research base you do right now, but those are obviously closely tied. We talked about that last time, a lot of times the social class we are in is because of the job or income we have, which is because of the education required, and everything else.

Tomas then commented, “It’s interesting, I don’t like Diane Ravicth. She was actually a conservative for many years and she just switched to make money. I don’t mean to be blunt, be she is like the big white hope, all the white teachers really support her. That is just my opinion.:

I said that I had not heard that before, but I understand that.

Tomas went on, “I have been to many conferences, I have talked to people and they make the same comments that she is the great white hope for social justice so I really don’t respect her as an academic. Her points about assessment are very powerful because when you think about policy, policy is set up to benefit certain people. Last time we talked about housing segregation, we talked about school funding, and we talked about how everything is related to income. I think those are all connected to laws and policies and policies are set up to benefit certain people. Because people who are the judges, people always say that all the politicians are really run by corporate media like corporations and stuff. I think it is like the neo-liberalism, through the idea of privatization and we see that happening now with public schools. I made a comment today with another teacher earlier, and I always say this and I get in trouble, but I think within public schools’ administration is actually trying to purposely destroy public education.

He continues, “But the key thing about assessment, if you think about standardized assessments, that is only to benefit administration. Because if you think about it, it is the only way to a large scale type of assessment on achievement. In the past when we used to do assessments we did portfolios. It took more time, it cost more, but it was more adequate in identifying what kids could do. But now when you do a large scale testing like standardized

testing that is easier to keep track of. Now when you think about what is going on with teacher pay and evaluation, that is where it is headed to. So it's all going to be based on test scores. If you look at the scripted literacy from NCLB, at the literacy level, that's another problem too. President Reagan did have a say with the publishers. There was a connection with all that, you know he picked a publisher and they got all the money from the federal government. That is part of that game from really scripting teaching and scripting of what they want in curriculum and its really tied to assessment. I think assessments are very powerful. That is a very powerful area and that is where the most money is and how you justify what you are doing. Even though it's not adequately, from a psychometric point of view, it is not accurately measuring achievement, in my opinion. Our internal assessment doesn't. I talked with the assessment coordinator at the district level, so she knows, and she has a PhD in that."

**Analysis.** The participants all bring out the idea that all children can learn, but the children at the poverty level have many more challenges than those who are in the other social classes. The ideas of the curriculum targeting specific needs, such as basic skills that are lacking, were discussed and how that should be addressed. Most appreciated the idea that it was acknowledged that poverty is an issue. As this was acknowledged, the idea of some teachers not knowing about the experiences of the students appeared in the discussion. While there is currently movement with professional development for educators regarding teachers knowing and understanding the students they teach, it focuses primarily on race. The social class system should be addressed, in addition to the conversations around race. Assessment is necessary, but Tomas ended with the point that we should focus on assessments that truly help educators make instructional decisions to help students learn to their maximum capacity, not just assessments for the sake of satisfying school needs.

## **Teacher's Responsibilities and Obligations**

"We talked about our obligations; What are our next steps? What do we do?" I posed these questions to the group. Carol started us off, "I think the people that care have to move up into ranks where they can make a difference. And so often they don't. They stay in their classroom doing their work. They need to be vocal. But we also need to make people care and want to put money into it--not think our kids are throwaway kids. It's very true. It's just so fascinating. I think people think you can't break the cycle of poverty, even though it's been done over and over again with the right tools. I think people don't want to gamble on it. I think really it would take a revolution of teachers who have a lot of research and a lot of knowledge to get into the media and try to get to the school board. I think our school board keeps us down."

Lisa responded to Carol's idea, "So you talked about allotting money. I don't think our school board allocates money as well as it should. Obviously our government doesn't allocate money as well as they should. Things that make sense to teachers they don't get on board to buy. Technology in the classroom is huge. I personally, as a teacher, would love it if students could use their cell phones and text me the answers. They have them out anyway; I'd rather have them texting me rather than someone else or looking up a music video."

Lisa continued, "I just think that if you get them engaged and use the things that they love, they'll want to learn more. I personally use a lot of current events. I teach a reading program, pretty much direct instruction, and I had this article about texting while driving. The kids loved it. They loved it because it was real to them. They could apply it to their own lives. And it doesn't have to be a novel that they have to read as long as they are reading information. We talked about that during an in-service. But I think it's huge getting parents involved. And pushing people up in the ranks to get things going and done."

Tomas pointed out that, “Tom mentioned it before in so many words, that education is the equalizer to access for jobs, to higher level income and social class. And I think public education, specifically if it is founded under the democratic values of our country, about equality and justice, it should be run that way and it’s not. I always tell friends who I get together with from college, the ones I helped in math who now work for other companies and make double what I make, we get together and go out to eat, and they are like, ‘Oh I am going to pick up the bill because Tomas is a teacher. You don’t make much money’ so they tease me about that. And I tell them, I may not make a lot of money but something that I have that you don’t have is when you go to work, you deal with these other people, you have these other issues, but when I go to work, I go to work really happy and excited it’s not about the money it’s about connecting with people. I always tell them the reason you get paid more is because you make the rich richer and I make the poor richer. And when I say that they are like, that’s kind of strong. And I say, yes it is because all of you, most of you---all---most of them come from immigrant backgrounds, or they came from poor backgrounds that is the only reason why they were able to make that money. Because they went through what their parents sacrificed, they went school, they went to college and they were the first generation to go to college. They understand what I say that I make the poor rich so you are not going to make money. There is no stability in making money for that.”

Tomas continued, “But the connections that you make, when kids invite you to their college graduation--that’s an honor. When they have three tickets and they invite mom, dad and you, that’s very powerful. I mean what more do you want as a teacher? Connecting it to the purpose of public education, I think that is our job. And not to knock out the other people like in your position, at the district level administrators or whatever, when it comes down to it, it’s really the teachers. If we have strong teachers, qualified teachers that like their job, well they

should love their job, should know their content area, are connected with students, the families, community, you could really make a lot of changes. But I think public education is something that, I feel that we are losing it just given all the different policy changes. I feel like we are losing public education. That is the last step for us to maintain to provide options for the kids who don't have anything. When I have kids in my classroom from Puerto Rico or Mexico, whatever country, when they come to my classroom, the parents are working 12 hours a day 6 days a week for a job. They are depending on me to help their child with their English, to maintain their language, to help them academically, to advise them with college, even if something happens to them, to take them to the hospital. They are giving me a lot of responsibilities. So I can either not dedicate time to doing that. Like I always tell teachers, if you are following your job description, that is not enough. = In order to make a change you have to go far beyond what is covered in your job description. With anything, if you are going to make some change you have to do things that are not traditional or typical, for me, that is what is key about public education. It is still the only entity that's conscious of justice and about being democratic so far. Nothing is perfect, but compared to private schools or private schooling, I am a little worried about that because that is actually, you know when you think about the mentality of people with the business models and these ideas about making money and profit, that's kind of, you know a capitalistic society that they promote that. Still when people think of public universities how many, that is still a part of segment in our population that allows for some type movement for economic change for a person."

Tom begins with, "I want to validate what Tomas says first. I see him and he wears a lot of hats, serves a lot of roles to these kids. He is like a parent to some, and a friend to a lot, and he really does go above and beyond, and you see the benefits and effort that he puts in. Going the

extra mile going above and beyond. Because those kids trust him. In a lot cases he is the only one that knows certain things about those kids. So it powerful to see that and it is skill that he possesses that I don't know if you can teach it and not everybody has it, that's for sure.:

Tom continues, "the thing about your question, 'what can we do?' I think that's the million-dollar question. There are so many things that we.... I guess that's why my original question was according to who? Because our job is to educate them and prepare them, on the lowest level, for the next course, if we are teaching algebra we need them to be successful with skills for.... right? So they can have opportunities in those higher level math classes and have opportunities and all those potential careers that are big paying and can contribute back to society with research or whatever it may be. But then we also seem to have responsibility to teach them to be productive members of society. To teach them hygiene sometimes, to teach them how to treat others, to teach them responsibility. To teach them all these soft skills that have nothing to do with standardized tests, but what you so desperately need to survive in society as well.:

Tom summarizes, "so I don't know what we can do with the resources we have. I know what we can't do, I just feel we can't continue to do is to enable and continue to provide one of the very few false environments on this planet. A place where you can show up when you please, and talk to anyone the way you want, and there is not a consequence or learning opportunity that we fail to take advantage of. I just fear for that a certain group of our kids we are setting them up for failure. You can't talk to your boss like that, you can't talk to a police officer, you can't talk outside these walls and not have some pretty severe consequences and just to see these kids be incarcerated or get in trouble with the law or destroy their credit, or whatever the case may be,

because we refused to give them consequences here. They don't have effective consequences or mentoring at home. I guess that's what I see we continually do that we need to stop.:

Tomas explains further, "I am going to go back to my comment about the immigrants. If they don't speak the language, they don't have the education, pretty much they live in poverty. Then my role as a teacher becomes even more important because I am their social capital, I am the one who is going to translate bureaucracy for them to get into and apply for financial aid and other stuff and kind of challenge their misconceptions they have been told to them, 'Oh you have to save money to go to college and you have to 19 or 20 on the ACT.' Well that's one of part of many of the options for going into the university they look into. You just kind of have to deal with all these misconceptions that are put on people, or you can't do it, or you're not going to be able to do this. Whatever barriers people have put up for them, you become a very critical person to challenge those ideas."

### **Summary**

The big take away from the standardized testing conversation was the validation teachers felt when discussing the point that the more poverty in a district, the lower the standardized test scores. This acknowledgment then led to the discussion about our obligations as educators and recommendations for solving the problem. The idea of ample resources surfaced in order to provide students an education so they can compete with children born in the upper classes. Participants felt with better resources, students would have a better education and, therefore, a better chance to break the cycle of poverty.

Throughout this study, the reality that children in poverty have more barriers and issues that prevent them from learning, not just scoring well on tests, was acknowledged and addressed. There have been numerous explanations and recommendations suggested for ways to address this fundamental problem in education. Smaller class size was mentioned, as well as providing



more resources for the impoverished urban areas. Smaller class sizes allow for more personal attention to students, to provide more adult contact and ensure the student's educational needs are being met. Another recommendation was that the best teachers teach at the schools with the highest poverty level. Along with this there is a need to raise the prestige of teaching again so that the best of the best will look to this assignment as an honor. Additionally, focusing on the education of students at an early age was mentioned as a way to remedy the deficits in basic skills and vocabulary. Systemic recommendations centered around the idea of allocating money more appropriately so that it is felt in the classroom more. And the idea that leaders of the district should be leaders that know firsthand about the students in the community and that have had experience with them.

This study allowed participants the flexibility to respond to one another's thinking. As a result, there was rich conversation that displayed their beliefs and values. Participants were able to reflect on the students they encounter as well as family members in their lives. It was through the personal narratives of the participants that allowed me, as a researcher, a glimpse of how the each made sense of the social class system. The topics were intertwined in many ways. While the beginning of the conversation started with "safe topics," such as nutrition and lead poisoning, the conversation then shifted to demonstrate how individuals construct their ideas and beliefs based on their personal experiences. Topics included social class and achievement which was also related to standardized testing and how influential social class is assessment. When explaining how the participants knew their truths to be truths, it was personal experiences, or the lack of, such as with people in the upper class, that they used to explain their thinking. The complexity of the social class system was expressed in the comparison of the Caste System to the United States social class system as well as the prevalence of social class in schools. Throughout the four hours

of conversation there were comments that indicated the values between the social classes were different. Finally, sprinkled throughout mostly, by Tomas and Tom, were ideas of the structural system of social class within the school system itself.

In the following chapter I will identify a few themes from the conversation and explain how those themes arose. In addition, I will explain my learnings and recommendations moving forward.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Analysis and Recommendations**

In this chapter I will discuss two overarching themes that arose from the data, along with personal learnings and recommendations. The two themes are identified as personal narrative/identity construction, and the mindset of poverty, including the understanding of the social class system. Finally, I will discuss my overall learnings from the study and recommendations for next steps. When analyzing the data, the challenge was looking at the responses individually, while at the same time capturing the robust conversations that occurred as a result of each of the participant's comments. As this study was intentionally constructed to allow for the conversation to meander in different directions, that also made it difficult to break into smaller sections for the analysis.

There were two research questions which guided this study: 1. How do teachers make sense of the complex social class system? and 2. How does that influence how they make sense of their students and families? Common rhetoric around research sometimes implies, well of course that was the conclusion, it is common sense. But, within the answer sometimes lies a complexity that on the surface may appear "common sense" but when further unpacked, is discovered to be complicated. To answer the first question simply stated, I found that teachers make sense of the social class system through their personal experiences. The complexity lies within the analysis of the different personal experiences that each has had. Your family life, the way your parents raised you and the values instilled, are one contributing factor. The experiences you have with other people and how you interpret those, also influence how we view others and social class. As we are surrounded, usually with likeminded people and people who share the same social class, our perception and sense making is therefore limited to those interpretations.

The second question, how teachers make sense of their students and families, is connected to their personal experiences as explained in the first question. I am very conscious of how when I am sitting next to people and we are hearing someone speak that all of our interpretations of what is being said is slightly different. This is true of any situation. Our personal biases, preferences, and experiences influence how we see the world and how we in turn react to it. What I have stated earlier is that vast majority of teachers I have worked with went into education to make a difference to a child. The interpretation comes into play when we then impose what we think is making a difference to that child. Teachers make sense of their students and families from what they know (or assume they know, based on their experiences) to be true.

“Teachers definitions of students reflect the culture of the educational organization and are, simultaneously, one of its defining elements.: (Page, 1987, p. 89). The research question was “how do teachers make sense of the social class system?: When analyzing the data two overriding themes were apparent when answering this question: the mindset of poverty and social class and one’s personal narrative which includes the understanding of the social class system. Mindset refers to the idea that poverty in itself is a huge barrier with many contributing factors that may lead to students at the poverty level with too many struggles to overcome. While there are many obstacles to overcome, hard work could, and values of hard work will, overcome the situation of poverty itself. The concept of mindset, was derived from the work of Carol Dweck. She describes a growth versus a fixed mindset. In a growth mindset, people are taught that intelligence is something that can grow over time. In a fixed mindset people tend to think that intelligence is fixed at birth and therefore not in control of the learner (Dweck, 2006).

Personal narrative/identity construction refers to the personal and professional experiences the members shared which helped form their perspectives and beliefs, not only about their students, but in essence, about the complex social class system itself. The identity construction is included as the process of the experiences along with personal values and beliefs work together to help the participants unconsciously construct the way they see the world and ultimately the students they teach.

### **Personal Narrative/Identity Construction**

Earlier I stated, “Perceptions are one’s reality.: The participants all taught in the same school. While they had different experiences which shaped their beliefs, it was apparent there were some general understandings about the struggles that under resourced students face. The teachers in this study shared their background knowledge that helped them understand their students, which is related to the social class system. The first lens to explore will be that of the personal narrative/identity construction.

Personal narrative/identity construction includes the following from Peter Hoffman-Kipp as he defines teacher identity as, “the intersection of personal, pedagogical and political participation and reflection within a larger socio-political context” (Hoffman-Kipp, 2008, p. 153). He continues to explain how cultural assumptions and norms also contribute to how one defines oneself. He also describes the process that includes the “mix of values, beliefs, attitudes, approaches to interaction, and languages that has been developed in personal realm (life history, family, community of origin): (Hoffman-Kipp, 2008, p. 153). When analyzing the data and the group interaction, it was clear that the aforementioned was a large factor in how the teachers were making sense of their students and the social class system. As adults with many experiences, we know that our experiences, both positive and negative, help to form our opinions and influence our perceptions.

But it is the awareness of identity consciousness (Hoffman-Kipp, 2008) that can help us better make sense of our students. This can be compared to Ladson-Billings' (2001) description of how white middle class teachers bring their perspective (white-middle class) with them and that they unconsciously impose the values on students. Unconsciously here means that for the most part the teachers are unaware they are doing it. Social class and race are both aspects of teacher's identities and experiences that impact how they make sense of their students.

According to Maguire, "Identities are not unitary phenomenon but are products of multiple and often conflicting discourse and practices" (Maguire, 2008, p. 44). The personal and professional experiences to most, if not all of the members, were the largest contributors to their perception and perspective on the social class system, in this study. While identity development occurs in our teenage years (Erickson) continual construction occurs over one's life due to experiences and how we interpret these experiences.

All of the group members commented on the idea that schools in an urban setting have fewer resources than schools in the suburbs. They related that to their own previous high schools or schools they had visited. Jonathan Kozol has written extensively about this very idea for many years. In his work, *The shame of the nation: The restoration of apartheid in schooling in America* (2005), he continues his discussion about schools in poverty areas he originally described in *Savage inequalities* (1991) and finds the same depressing conditions have not changed. The group members described their urban school didn't have necessities such as toilet paper and paper towels in bathrooms stocked all the time. Kozol's work describes buildings that have broken windows that are not repaired and living conditions in which schools are located next to a hospital incinerator. The group members expressed a lack of respect that was conveyed

by the fact that the bathrooms at their school were not replenished in timely fashion with basic supplies.

Tomas described the lack of uniforms for athletes, and the fact that students were in awe of the facility in the suburban-like school. Lisa talked about her school as a high school student and how it was like the Taj Mahal compared to the school she teaches in now. The message that students receive when knowing about the unequal distribution of resources was also discussed. Carol and Lisa discussed the idea that students felt they were “throw-aways.” Carol added that she had heard students say that the school is trashy and that “they” don’t care for us. Some of the discussion included ideas that young children don’t know they are poor, but the consensus of the group was that students did recognize their social position when they got to high school as a result of seeing suburban schools and accessing information on the Internet and social media. This too is reflected in the interviews that Jonathan Kozol has with children in impoverished areas. In addition, from the video by Bill Moyers, *Unequal Education*, the student profiled from the South Fordham school talks about the suburbs. He says that the people in the suburbs are treated better and we live in the “ghetto.” This is another reflection of poverty as fixed mindset – society treats students in the impoverished areas different as described by the young student.

For the personal narrative theme, all but one gave examples from their personal life stories with regard to their idea of what social class strata they are in. Lisa talked a few different times about her struggles. She focused on the idea that she had to set the example for her children. She said it all comes down to “family values, with a single family or having a father.” She didn’t think her own children would have turned out as well had it not been for her good example. She valued having had the struggle and coming out on top; as a result, she doesn’t have to worry as much.

The participants' upbringing was discussed often, and how most struggled financially. All had personal or family experiences that related to the situations that arise in poverty. Tom showed concern about making generalizations, indicating he was cognizant that experiences don't equate to a statement about "all." Tom and Lisa both discussed "triumphs" they had personal experiences with. Lisa discussed her own story whereas Tom spoke of his uncle. Both stories reiterated the idea that if you work hard, you will prosper. Tomas was very skeptical of this; he wondered whether this was working for Blacks and women?

To expand upon the poverty mindset, Dweck's work was the catalyst for the terminology, but the meaning extends to include other factors. When referring to a fixed mindset for this study it reinforces the idea that the social class system is fixed, as the Caste System, and that upward movement is next to impossible to achieve. In addition, the idea of sociocultural consciousness is also incorporated. Sociocultural consciousness is based on the idea our, "ways of thinking, behaving, and being are deeply influenced by such factors as race/ethnicity, social class and language" (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p.22). If teachers are not aware of the factors that sociocultural factors that influence their thinking, they will continue to have a fixed way of viewing their students and the social class system they live in. While the study did not incorporate the above factors of the participants, it is noted that these factors influence our points of view. While education is supposed to be the leveler and provide multiple avenues for individuals to advance their situation, we know that the structures within the institution of schooling continue to maintain the division of the haves and have nots (Labaree, 1997). Within the growth mindset is included the biological and nutritional factors that are more prevalent in children of poverty.



**American dream.** The growth mindset extends Dweck's definition by incorporating the idea of the American Dream. The American Dream was pointed out to be a myth earlier in Chapter Two, however, here it is used to explain that while it is a myth so many people believe that it is still possible. Even with staggering data that informs the public that the rich are truly getting richer, a fact that has been verified through recent research. In 2014, Saez and Zucman explained the phenomenon, "By our estimates, almost all of this increase is due to the rise of the share of wealth owned by the 0.1% richest families, from 7% in 1978 to 22% in 2012, a level comparable to that of the early twentieth century." (Saez, E., & Zucman, G., (2014, p.1).

Even with data, many people with whom I work and socialize, continue to believe that if poor people would "just pull up their bootstraps" and get a job, they would no longer be at the poverty level. This also further explains the influence of the sociocultural consciousness. The people I have encountered believe that the American Dream is still alive as they themselves are in the shrinking middle class. So the mindset of poverty is more complex as it includes factors that influence one's thinking that poverty is both fixed mindset, with factors that cannot change, and also a growth mindset that explains that with supports all can "escape" the bounds of poverty.

While looking for themes in the data, Carol's opening comments were about nutrition and the correlation between social class and achievement. This led to her belief that the lack of nutrition is a contributing factor to low achievement in students. She continued this discussion when she talked about a family member. The family member stated how hard it was to access healthy foods. She shared empathy for her family member. As she knew the struggles of her family member she could see the other side of trying to buy healthy foods. This was another instance that helped shape her perceptions about the social class system.

Lisa mentioned two different examples that illustrate the idea of the mindset of poverty as a struggling and almost hopeless situation. She mentioned that when she was younger it was not worth it to make money above the poverty line because then her public assistance was lowered. The difficulty she expressed is that it wasn't worth it for the little amount of extra money she received. In addition, she described two experiences with her students. One in which the student is excited to be receiving more public assistance. She responded that she had to explain to him that that is not free money. Again, this contributes to the idea that those at the poverty level have a specific mindset. The other example is when she described how parents at the poverty level learn how to "work" the system. She quoted a mother saying "remember you cannot read" so the student is eligible for Supplemental Social Security Income. This has reference to the idea of generational poverty as well as the cycle of poverty.

Tom responded with examples of cycles of poverty and also includes generational poverty. He mentions that causation and correlation are two different things and he is also cautious about making generalizations about an entire group of people. His story of the family at parent teacher conferences explains his thinking as it relates to the mindset of poverty; the student was 15, her mother was 30, her mother's mother was 45 and great grandma was 60. Another response that corresponds to this line of thinking was that his students were surprised that his mother shared the same last name as him. He also interjected during a conversation that his mother would not lie to get assistance; she would swallow her pride and ask her dad. Tom also mentions his uncle who is he describes as a self-made wealthy man. He reiterated to the group that his uncle works hard for what he has and that he is teaching his daughter to do the same. His perception is that his uncle is the upper middle class and that he has worked hard to get there.

The three group members discuss the attributes in the mindset of poverty through examples of individuals they know, or themselves, personally. The focus is based on individual abilities; while some are biologically based, the others are not. Lisa discussed how she once lived at the poverty level, but through hard work and school, she is no longer there. The examples the three draw upon do not go in great depth and one question that arose in my thinking was about the social capital that people in the middle class have compared to those at the poverty level. Examples of social capital are having parents that can financially support adult children and access to college to obtain a well-paying job. Families at the poverty level don't necessarily have this type of support and therefore continue to struggle. The idea of social capital was not explicitly expressed by the three participants and could be one example of how teacher's perceptions of students are influenced by their particular value system. Those in the middle class may assume that this type of social capital is something that all people have. This reiterates the complexity of the social class system in that we believe our truths based on what we have experienced.

Tomas's responses (in contrast to Tom) regarding the mindset of poverty are more directed toward the system as opposed to individuals. Tomas' remarks reflect that of a systems approach. His poverty mindset is more inclined toward the idea that the system itself is fixed. He discussed how the nation is more segregated now than before, which is supported by research. One study that confirms this points out, that while racial minorities tend to live in relatively diverse neighborhoods, Whites remain highly isolated (Squires & Kubrin, 2005, p. 50). He also pointed to the system of meritocracy that Tom described about his uncle, but which doesn't seem to exist for Blacks and women. This is supported in the article, *Tyranny of Merit* by Samuel Goldman (2012), "Equality of opportunity tends to be subverted by the inequality that meritocracy legitimizes" (p.42). As Tom discussed the segregation of our nation and our schools,

he also didn't think the under resourced students who are served at his school know just how under resourced they are, as everyone around them is in the same situation; only when they are exposed to other groups, such as through school programs and activities that bring them to other communities, that they realize their place in society.

The conversation around the Caste system shed light on Carol's understanding of the social class system. In her reflection for the second session, she said she thought a lot about that. Even though she taught the Caste system to her students, she never thought of the social class system in the United States as a closed system. Lisa and Tom both made comments about being able to get out of poverty, which would lend itself to the growth mindset I described earlier. Both felt that if you work hard enough any one can attain it. Tomas right out stated that for Blacks and women it is a myth that if you work hard you'll get there. His comments indicate he believes in the fixed poverty mindset.

**Entitlement.** The idea of "entitlement" came up in a few different conversations. Entitlement is a strong word with the meaning, "I am owed this.": Lisa shared that she didn't think some students should be graduating—that they had not actually earned the right to graduate. She shared a little snippet of her conversation with her friends after our first session, in which race was mentioned and the perception of her friends is that an urban setting involves handouts. While race is something I have specifically kept separate in this study, it has come up a few times. Lisa also shared she doesn't think the emphasis is on education in the households that are at the poverty level. She explained that she didn't think they had that intrinsic need to succeed in education. She also explained how, through working with students, she focused on the students who want to learn as she can see more a reward from those students. In addition, parents

or guardians need to be more involved in their child's education. Handouts, lack of motivation, and entitlement are definitely attributed to the mindset of poverty that is fixed, according to Lisa.

The theme of entitlement was interesting as it arose in numerous ways throughout the conversations. At one point Tomas stated that the students didn't know they were poor, but then later he told the story when he took the swim team to a really nice suburban school and the students were in awe of the facilities. The group was in consensus that when students got to the high school level, they were aware of their social position in society. This awareness is seen through the comments that Carol made about the students being throwaways and then Lisa explaining how some students haven't earned a high school diploma but believe they are owed one. Tom talks about students being aware due to their dress, like the fake jewelry, and the Internet. It appears that the theme of entitlement, according to the data, is learned over time.

The other three group members defined poverty as a mindset as more of an individual basis to overcome. The Conflict theory by Karl Marx is linked to this theme. Marx's Conflict theory relates to the idea that society is a constant state of conflict as we are competing for the limited resources. This creates a system that has winners, but then, must also have losers. The upper class, who have all the resources and power, will continue to create a system that allows them to be dominant and others to fail. The system itself is not set up for all to win or achieve. As Tomas mentioned throughout the conversations, the system is set up for the students with middle class values. The social class system can also be seen through the work of Ruby Payne. She cites some examples of "hidden rules" that can be interpreted as values. Some examples are patriarchal family hierarchy versus matriarchal; education is crucial for climbing success ladder and making money versus education is valued and revered as abstract but not as reality; and driving forces of work and achievement versus survival, relationships, and entertainment. These

are recurring positions in many of the statements made by the participants. Tomas explains specifically that he thinks teachers force their “white middle class” values on the students. As this is a mismatch, as illustrated also by Payne’s work, Tomas maintains it is to maintain the status quo.

**Social class identification.** Within the poverty mindset there was another idea directly revealed. It was the idea of the knowledge each participant had of the social class system itself. At one point they all shared what they perceived to be the social class they belonged to. Lisa talked about growing up in a middle class household. She classified the school she attended as a “good school” where there was pressure to get good grades. She further explained that she didn’t know the value of a good education until she was forced into a situation where she had to provide for herself. She explained throughout the conversation that it was during this time she set a good example for her children by going to school to better herself. This ties not only into the personal narrative shaping her beliefs, but also to Ruby Payne’s hidden rule that the middle class see education as crucial to make money and climb the career ladder of success. Payne’s work describes that teachers need to teach children the hidden rules so they can be successful without addressing the inequities within the system. This also describes the myth of the American Dream: if you work really hard, you too can break through the barriers of the social class you were born into. What is missing is the acknowledgement that the system is inequitable and that is what needs to be addressed. Without understanding the ideas of social capital, and the inequities built into the system, schools and teachers unconsciously will continue to perpetuate the myth of the American Dream.

Tomas never really mentioned what social class he belongs to. He did question the definition of social class and asked how I, the researcher, was defining middle class. He spoke of

the increasing gap between the rich and poor. He believes the increasing gap is being created purposefully to separate people and that the middle class doesn't really exist anymore. Tomas went on to identify the varying characteristics that define social class. He talked about housing segregation and how that also is connected to what school you attend. He reiterated that the affluent don't have any problems because this is a capitalistic society and everyone wants to be rich and have everything.

**Role of urban education.** The idea of what teaching looks like in the urban schools was discussed. While Lisa and Carol both talked about good and bad teachers, it reminded me of the article by Dr. Martin Haberman, *The Pedagogy of Poverty*. The beginning conversation with Lisa and Carol included a discussion about students' lack of vocabulary and basic skills. Dr. Haberman points out that in urban schools we rely mostly on lower level, focusing on teaching such as basic skills. While the facts are that many of the students are behind in basic skills, only focusing on the basic skills will not achieve learning and getting students up to grade level expectations. Students need rich experiences with a conceptual context in order to help them see the relevance and purpose for learning (Darling-Hammond, 2008). Lisa talked about using direct instruction for students. She said she teaches reading, but uses current events because she sees the students really liking the current events. Direct instruction focuses on the basic skills rather than also including the conceptual higher level thinking skills, stressed by Dr. Haberman. The focus for learning cannot stay at the basic level as students will not learn or be interested; learning experiences must include a mixture of both, which is something that Lisa seemed to understand.

Carol and Lisa both say that it is easier to identify struggles of children at the poverty level as that is what they have the most experience with. All but Tomas reiterate they only have experience with students in the urban school setting. Tom mentions how he has never taught at a

school that receives the “cream of the city.” Tom also shared his experience growing up with a single mother. When thinking of Payne’s descriptions of the differences pointed out between middle and lower classes, what is important to one class is not necessarily important to another. Cell phones and TVs and the right tennis shoes are something that appears to be part of the culture of poverty. While I have heard many times teachers say “the students can afford a cell phone, but they cannot afford a pencil.” The status symbol of the cell phone and the shoes are much more important to students and their parents. This is what makes them part of their community (Payne, 2006). While the teachers can identify some of the characteristics, it appears they are still, to quote Tomas, “forcing white middle class values on the students.”

The personal narrative and our previous experiences influence our thinking and actions as demonstrated in this study. Perceptions about how we think institutions work influence our day to day interactions. In addition, this influences how we identify ourselves. Our self-identify influences our interactions with others as well. Our personal narrative also helps determine our mindset when it comes to poverty. Whether we think it something that is systemic and will not “fixed” without society taking a look at the inequities within the United States, or if we think there is opportunity for all to achieve.

### **Reflection and Learnings**

I began this journey to find out what I thought was a simple question, “how do teacher’s perceptions influence student achievement?” I quickly realized that there are so many factors that influence students’ achievement, that I had asked an unanswerable question. I then modified my research question to try to understand how teachers made sense of, or understand, our most under-resourced students in the United States; children at the poverty level. The following quote refers to the idea of what making sense means:



“cognition refers to the way you look at things - your perceptions, mental attitudes, and beliefs. It includes the way you interpret things - what you say about something or someone to yourself.: David D. Burns

What I learned while engaging in this research was not only how strong personal experiences influence beliefs and opinions about students, but also the complexity involved in the research process. No matter what factual information is presented and/or learned, personal experiences still hold steadfast. In my personal life I am politically opposite of many of my friends and living relatives. As a rule, we don't talk politics and the reason I now believe is due to the personal narrative with beliefs and values, which makes a person who they truly are. Perceptions and experiences then meld together to shape a person's character and belief system. Values and beliefs are held so personal; they are extremely difficult to change in people. This sounds so “common sense” but it makes me understand why many people I have encountered in my life don't waiver on controversial issues such as the causes and cures for poverty. This study has helped me not only better understand how teachers think, but also how people come to form beliefs and values which influences their perception of urban education.

In the 1990's when I was a classroom teacher, I was fortunate to teach a class that incorporated social stratification, more commonly known as the social class system. This was when I was first introduced to Jonathan Kozol. His work drove me to understand more and with that drive I brought my students along with me. We researched, read and debated controversial issues such as racism and poverty. At the time I was trying to persuade them to see the inequity issue the same as me, as a system that is set up to benefit the haves and to disqualify the have nots. Quite the task as this was a very conservative farm area with the majority of students living way above the poverty line. Reflecting back on those experiences with my students, I am again informed how powerful personal experiences are toward framing our values and beliefs. Many of

the students had never been exposed to what Kozol described. The school they attended was in great condition. While I was there in the 1990's, the community passed a 16-million-dollar referendum to refurbish and add on to the high school. It was considered a "state of the art" facility with a commons area that mirrored those of a college campus. Teachers were allotted a good amount of money to spend on teaching materials for their classrooms. All teachers were certified in their content area. Students in this school experienced a beautiful campus with abundant teaching materials. These experiences, similar to those of past experiences of Carol, Lisa, Tom, and Tomas, most definitely influenced their thinking about schools in urban areas. Unless they had visited one, they had no idea what the comparison was. This research helped me make more sense of why many of the students were not eager to talk about inequities in education: they were not really certain it existed.

About a year ago I was sharing a story with a teacher friend of mine of a teacher that I had observed during the day. The classroom I visited had a relatively new teacher with only two or three years of experience. The lesson I observed was a freshman class engaging in a low level discussion about wants and needs. I said to my friend, "that was a third grade lesson. How can he end his day and think, wow I did a great job today?": Her response to me was, "he ended the day thinking, 'wow, I survived another day.'" Reflecting upon the learnings from this research I realize that this new teacher is lacking the skills to work with students who come from backgrounds so vastly different from his. This really opened up my thinking and understanding around the idea that teachers I work with, who are predominately middle class, are lacking in the understanding of how to react to, and many times how to teach, children who live in poverty.

I grew up with a single mother with a steady job. Then when I was about 16 she lost her job and could only get work part time as a bartender. We experienced some instances where

money for food was scarce, as I discussed with the group. As a result of me experiencing this, only for a few years, I thought that influenced my belief system about those at the poverty level; the American social class system is similar to a Caste System with little to no movement. And that the cycle of poverty is so extremely difficult to overcome due to external barriers that society has instituted. I have believed this beginning in the 1990's when I conducted research with my students as a classroom teacher. This study opened my eyes to the idea that just because you experienced something, doesn't mean the values and beliefs that are engrained in you will change.

Earlier I quoted that "perception is reality.": This statement has proven to be more true to me as a result of this study. The responses to the question, "how do you know these to be truths" were mostly based on previous experiences from just recently to childhood. In a few of the conversations there was the underlying theme that parents of children in poverty don't value education. As I think about how this was constructed, it was based on experiences with parents. My experiences with parents include both instances that may support this, but overwhelming support that all parents want better for their children. While I was an Assistant Principal I handled discipline for 9<sup>th</sup> grade students. One student in particular stands out: Blake. Blake was a smart, well-spoken young man who had some difficulty controlling his anger. I remember saying to him, "Blake, I have more conversations with you than I do my own son" as we would meet frequently throughout the week. He had instances outside of school as well, and was arrested frequently that year. I met with his mother on several occasions and she would say to me that she just didn't know what to do. I could see the angst and that she was at odds as how to help her son. This experience for me reinforced the idea that all parents want better for their children. This study opened my mind to the fact that experiences influence perceptions and beliefs,

however, some experiences are more powerful than others. In some cases, negative experiences appear to influence and stay present more than the positive experiences. It may be that experiences that tend to confirm our thinking and beliefs override those experiences that appear to contradict our firsthand knowledge. This study again helped me understand that our belief systems influence how we perceive our currently reality.

Finally, I reflected upon the idea of hope. One thing that I always say is that “hope is not a strategy but we must have hope for all of our students.: I believe this idea of hope existed with the participants in the study. Previously I made this statement as I wasn’t sure if those who worked in an urban setting believed this. While reflecting back on the conversations, each participant discussed hope for the students through their perspective. The new learning for me is that it is through each person’s “lens” they have hope for students. While some teachers may feel it important that students learn to “pull up their bootstraps” others think that students need special accommodations that include “raising the academic achievement bar.: The key learning is tied again to the idea of personal experiences that influence beliefs and values, also influence how we may define hope for others.

## **Recommendations**

“Academic research has found that compared with children in more economically mixed communities, children raised in predominantly lower-income neighborhoods are less likely to move into the middle class” (Beloit Daily News, May 12, 2016. p. 1). This most recent information reinforces for me that the social class system in the United States benefits only the few born into the upper classes. As a result of what I have learned I have four overarching recommendations: 1. Pre-service training/learning for those going into teaching that includes a deep understanding of the social class system and how that institution influences the school institution. 2. A focus of culturally responsive teaching strategies that includes beginning with

self-reflection for all educators. 3. Leadership learning focus in equity for district and school leaders that includes the inequity in the social class system. And 4. Additional research with regard to teacher's perceptions of poverty and the social class system and how those perceptions influence academic achievement.

### **Pre-Service Education**

Experiences for the pre-service educators should include reflection time so they can learn more about who they are and how they came to be that person today. The learning that occurred by the participants and me involved reflection and dialogue with colleagues. New educators should experience situations where they are exposed to information that reflects the current state of the social class system, but also how they interpret that information. The meaningful conversations the participants had were as a result of reflecting on information, but more so reflecting on what each other said while incorporating past experiences. Reflections such as the ones the participants experienced will open up the minds of the new educators so they are aware of attributes that are used unconsciously when we interact with our students. With awareness comes the opportunity to think carefully about reacting to situations and being in the classroom.

Pre-service teachers also need to be exposed to the ideas of getting to know students through understanding of their own biases. One recommended text to start the conversation about student's perceptions is to read the book, *Do You Know Enough About Me to Teach me: A Student's Perspective* by Stephen Peters (2006). Dr. Peters' book gives the reader an insight into understanding student's lives through personal interviews. This book, in addition to dialogue and reflection, could be a beginning in pre-service teachers understanding the student voice.

In order more directly tie in the idea of inequities, I recommend the book by Paul Gorski, *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Erasing the Opportunity Gap (Multicultural*

*Education*. (2006). This book explains how the current education system takes a deficit approach to students at the poverty level rather than addressing the structural inequities in the United States. One chapter that will enlighten pre-service teachers in where he discusses the “Culture of Poverty” and this mindset leads us to myths about poor families and education. One such stereotype he discussed is the misperception that poor families don’t value education. This, and other examples, can additionally help the uncovering of biases that we may have that influence how we unconsciously act toward students. Both of these books will begin good conversations around the discovery of information to create an inequity lens.

Lastly, to assist with pre-service teacher education, an introduction to culturally responsive teaching strategies with an emphasis on being responsive to the inequities within the social class system, as well as education system. Culturally responsive pedagogy refers to “A pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural and historical referents to convey knowledge to impart skills and change attitudes.” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 13). Pre-service teachers should be exposed to what those strategies involve and look like in the classroom.

Cultural responsiveness and cultural relevance are phrases heard often in the educational arena. As the majority of teachers in urban schools are white and middle class and the majority of students are minority and poor, both concepts are important to learn about and understand. When I think back to when I first heard such phrases over 10 years ago, diversity really meant the color of your skin. The conversation was centered on race. In the district I was in at the time we were completing a book study on Glen Singleton’s *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools* (2014). When I reflect back I am astounded by the fact that we are more segregated today than we were 10 years ago. I know the conversation about

race needs to continue, but I think the missing piece is when discussing equity, the unjust social class system that exists in the United States is ignored. I recommend incorporating the lens of the social class system and the inequities that exist and inhibit members of society from breaking the cycle of poverty.

### **School Based Staff**

All staff members need to engage in the learning around culturally responsive teaching. In addition, the ideas of the social class system need to be apparent. By intertwining Gorski's work with work around cultural responsiveness, we have a better chance at making an impact for our children in schools. Educators in school systems need to experience the dialogue and reflection that the participants in this study explored. An approach at a school would need to include building a climate of trust among all staff members. This alone can be very time consuming, but without the foundation, nothing can be built to address the inquiry issues. In building trust, the staff would engage in learning about the social class system, then spend time reflecting on their personal narrative and how their past experiences have shaped who they are today. Staff at a school level need to engage in open conversations and learning about the inequity that is inherent in the school system. The inequality inherent social class system is more invisible than race and gender, therefore it must be intertwined in the learning. When biases can be brought to the level of awareness educators can begin to understand how they make sense of their students, the social class system, and how they are the person they are, today. Once they understand this, they will then be ready to learn about culturally responsive teaching strategies.

### **District and School Leadership Staff Learnings**

Before the staff in any school can engage in the conversations mentioned previously, district and school leaders must complete all the above first. Being a skilled leader is one of the

prerequisites for the learning also. If there are struggling leaders or new leaders, simultaneously the professional learning will need to include the components of what makes a leader effective along with the above. School and district leaders must know and understand their personal narratives and how their experiences have shaped their lives. Once they find out about themselves, finding out about colleagues, and leading them on their journeys, is next. This helps build not only an understanding of other people we work with, but also lays the foundation for trust. If the district and school leaders trust one another, this lays the foundation for the rest of the staff in the district to trust. Trust creates the opportunity for risk taking. Risk takers are more likely to learn as they will make mistakes, but be okay with making mistakes as it is part of the learning process.

The last recommendation is for additional research regarding teacher perceptions about social class and how this influences our perceptions and actions with students. Not only additional research studies, but more comprehensive studies to gain a better understanding of the upbringing, social class and educational background of the participants. One missing component of this study was delving into the background and upbringing of the participants. This knowledge now appears to be of the utmost importance. As we know how important relationships are with students and one another, we need further research to assist us in understanding the phenomenon of how perceptions and personal experiences influence our actions and interactions with students in the classroom.

Another missing component of this study was the follow up with the participants after the conversation. Finding out how the experience impacted their understanding of the social class system and their interactions with students would be key data. This next step is an important one for school leaders and staff to engage in with one another. The experience of the conversation is



the first step, but this the application of the learning that school staffs need to focus on. As a result of their new learnings and understandings about the social class system, what is next? I would contend the next step is enacting their learning and creating a school environment that considers the inequities in the educational setting. Schools need to develop curriculum that teach children specifically about the inequities in the system. Empowering the students with the knowledge of the inequitable system will allow change to occur. However, teachers and staff have to acknowledge that this inequitable system exists. This can be accomplished through time devoted to exploration of research and the creation of action plans for implementation of the research.

Contradictions in our thinking with the new learning must be addressed. In order for this to happen there must be an environment of trust and risk taking. If there were to be a third session with the group of teachers, I met with I would analyze the data using the literature review with them. I would hope that comparing what they said to the research would raise their awareness of the misconceptions they have about the social class system. Once awareness is raised they could then develop a better understanding and approach to students and their families to address the inequity issue. One comment I consistently hear from teachers is how important the support of the family is for student success. What I don't see are ways to get the family involved that go beyond the traditional parent conference or literacy/math event. If parent involvement is key, what do schools need to do differently to increase parent involvement? That is what needs to be determined by each school to meet the needs of the parents and students in their community. When teachers and staff have a culture of trust and respect, they then need to reach out to the community to create this same culture within the wider community. Getting to know families and understand their perspectives would be part of this also.

There is more evidence every day that the middle class is shrinking and the rich are getting richer. With this scenario, the children at the poverty level have dwindling chances of moving from the lower class to the middle class. Education is said to be the equalizer, but is the institution of school itself set up to assist all children? When the system is set up to only benefit a few, that leaves the majority in a disadvantageous position. It is imperative that all educators learn about how their beliefs are influenced and how this in turn influences our students that are most disenfranchised. If we do not take action and help educators gain a better understanding of the inequities within the social class system, students will continue to under achieve. School communities must embrace the families within their communities by understanding their perspectives through the lens of a system that is set up for winners and losers. The learning from the research was powerful and reinforced how important it is for educators to continue to understand their perceptions and themselves.

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